

War and Remembrance

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This paper is about my own personal memories of War and Remembrance, experienced thus far in my life in two stages: first, through my family—especially my grandfather and father, who were both American veterans, and secondly through my colleagues/friends, one from Belgium and another from the Netherlands, who provided me with valued experiences in more recent times.

My earliest remembrances of growing up in the Erhardt family in Cincinnati were those of being involved with VFW activities through my grandfather's chapter. Grandpa, like the others in his VFW Chapter, were veterans of the World War I. Grandpa was also one of the fortunate ones—he had been hit by a bullet in the stomach during World War I, but some surgeon nearly 100 years ago did a fine job of patching him up and saving his life. Some other memories of the chapter were social, such as the Christmas parties, in which the women set the tables and then the families sat down, listened to Christmas music, had dinner and entertained visits from Santa Claus.

However, there was the serious side to the chapter's life as well. Every year on Memorial Day, at that time exclusively celebrated on May 31st, the chapter gathered at deceased members' graves. All the World War I veterans were always dressed either in uniform, or a shirt and tie, along with their VFW hat. Their spouses always had on dresses and wore a flower.

The Memorial Day ritual itself involved a visit to the grave of the deceased members. The name of the late veteran was read, followed by prayers, a three-gun salute, and conclusion with taps—played by my father—a World War II veteran. Following the solemnity of the occasion,

everyone adjourned to a local tavern which had a private room, where they had pretzels, potato chips, and beer and cokes. This “post-remembrance gathering” never lasted more than 45 minutes to an hour.

While the mood at such events was always serious, even at the post-cemetery tavern stop, there was one exception to this. One year, after the VFW chapter paid the final salute to my grandfather at The Vine Street Hill Cemetery, we all left the cemetery by the main gates on Vine Street, turned right, and drove to a small tavern on the left side of the street. The owners had especially decorated the room nicely for us that year, in red, white and blue. However, one of the VFW members went over to a juke box and dropped a dime in and pushed the buttons for his music selection. Suddenly everyone in the room broke out laughing—for the song he had selected was “A Boy Named Sue” by Johnny Cash. Probably considered a “novelty song” during its time, the song led to a room full of laughter that lasted the time of the record and then some. That one year it seemed like everyone went home in a lighter mood--smiling.

The last remembrance I and my father attended for grandpa’s VFW chapter was the following year on Memorial Day. My grandfather, Erwin Erhardt, Sr. had lost his battle with cancer during the second half of the previous year, and the time had come to remember him. In the background, after the service and gun salute, my father played taps for what turned out to be the final time—for his father. All the members moved toward my dad afterward to thank him, asking if he was OK, and providing him with reassuring pats on the back. The social stop after grandpa’s memorial service was brief that year, and we departed rather soon for home.

It was always me, dad and grandpa and grandma at the Memorial Days services, although grandma died two years before grandpa. (My mother stayed home with my younger siblings) Following the death of my grandfather, my father ceased participating in the Memorial Day

services. After he had played taps for his father, I guess he felt that that chapter in his life had come to an end. Or perhaps, he didn't want the memories stirred year after year, as the remaining members of grandpa's chapter would soon be passing themselves.

There were many veterans in our family. My Uncle Charles was in World War I, but was a victim of a gas attack and lived the rest of his life with only one lung operating at full-capacity. My Uncle Frank served in the Navy during World War II. My Uncle Ed, known to us as Buddy, was a Marine in the Pacific. There he was wounded and also contracted malaria, but survived.

And then there was my father. He didn't speak much of World War II. He had been a member of the 83rd Division of the 3rd Army and landed on Utah beach nine days after D-Day. He was in the artillery unit and served as part of the occupation force in Germany for three months after the end of the war in Europe. Dad occasionally showed me a few things he had brought back with him from the war when I was young. He said very little about the combat, what he witnessed, or any other kinds of memories.

Maybe it was because of my age when I was around 13, that he recounted a story of a German boy he had talked to several times in post-war Occupied Germany. He told me the boy had asked my dad to please write him and to please keep in touch. Dad said he never did, because he was concerned that the government might be tracking letters addressed to Germany, and that he might be called in for questioning. I don't think he ever forgot the boy, and I believe he always felt a little bad for never having written him.

Perhaps my best feeling for what the war was like and how he related to it was when he took me, at about the age of 14, to see the movie "Patton." For the viewing of this motion picture, we met my Uncle Don and his son Carl up at the big cinema at Salem Mall in Dayton, OH. We all sat in

the theater engrossed in the three-plus hour-long film that evening, and my dad was very happy with having gone to see it. I must admit that the only distraction came when Patton swore profusely, and me and my cousin tipped forward in our chairs and looked at each other in great surprise. On the drive back home to Cincinnati, I remember dad talking about Patton and the war in general, but not about what he had directly seen in the “first person” during the war.

Before I was out of high school, dad told me about three fellow soldiers he had served with during World War II. They had been talking one day in 1945, debating who should go up to a small house and pick up the mail. He called them by their last names: Swartley, Bower, and Parady. These men decided to run up to a house, where the mail for their unit had been dropped. When they arrived, the house was hit by a German shell, killing all three of them instantly. That was all he told me. It was the only story dad related to me about deaths—and he showed no emotion. There were times where I think in the back of his mind, that he could have very easily been one of those dead men. I would hear about this episode at least three or four times over the years, but with no further detail.

Dad never really took part in a local VFW chapter, probably because he was raising a family of five kids. However, he did keep in touch with some of his war buddies from the 83rd Infantry division. Once in the summer after my 6th grade year, we went to the cities of Wareham and Boston, Massachusetts for vacation. While it was a nice time for the family, it gave dad time to reconnect with his buddies from the 83rd Infantry Division in towns from Boston to down to Providence R.I. I was with him when he talked to these men. They happily greeted each other during these reunions, sometimes hugged, and went on to talk about their current lives. I recall no discussion of the events of the war between nor among these men. I also believe dad’s best

friend from the 83rd division was “Ambrose” ‘Red’ Tynan, a Bostonian whom he talked to several times a year and saw a few more times—either in Boston or Cincinnati—until he died.

When time worked to his advantage, dad attended an 83rd Reunion—usually held in the eastern half of the United States. Overall, I believe he only attended about six reunions, which were held in Ohio, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and one in New York. Several times I went with him and my mom, especially if the reunion happened to be held in Cincinnati or Cleveland. However, as he aged, the people closer to him began to die, and he quit attending them.

Perhaps a substitution to the 83rd reunions was the annual World War II memorial held annually in August at Camp Atterbury, Indiana. In particular, the ceremony recognized and remembered all service men who trained at Camp Atterbury and were then dispatched to take part in World War II. My parents began attending these ceremonies around 1990, and soon dad was asked to lay a wreath at the 83rd Infantry Division marker, or sometimes that of the 6th Army. One of the things nice for him at Camp Atterbury was that it gave him a chance to meet up with one of his other buddies from the war, Robert Scheumann from Ft. Wayne, Indiana. Sometimes Scheumann brought one or two of his children as well, and I got to know their family better.

Dad’s participation in the Camp Atterbury memorial services came to an end about seven years ago. His legs were not as strong and walking up to lay a wreath during the memorial service was now more difficult for him. Furthermore, this past August, his last friend Bob Scheumann from the 83rd Division died, which my dad took somewhat hard. I tried to talk him into letting me take him to the 83rd Reunion in Philadelphia in early August, but I failed for two reasons—his weak legs, and because, as he told me, “everyone that he knew was dead.”

My career positioned me to eventually visit some of the battlefields and cemeteries of both wars with family connections. The opportunities first presented themselves, when I met a colleague named Kristof van Assche at Siena College's World War II Conference in 2002. Kristof learned of my conference travels to Europe and invited me to come to Ghent from which we could explore World War I and II battlefields, cemeteries, and memorials in Belgium and France. Since that initial visit in 2003, we have both met up to visit other war cemeteries and memorials in Europe. In 2012, while Kristof was on assignment with the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, we visited such places in eastern France, including Verdun—where my grandfather was wounded in battle. On that visit, we also drove to the Ardennes Forest, where my father saw action. On the fringe of the forest area we came across a memorial to the American divisions which had fought there in 1944-45. It included the name and emblem of the 83rd Infantry Division. I made sure to have my pictures taken with it as an immediate backdrop. Finally, on that trip Kristof drove over to Belgium to visit the Luxembourg-American Cemetery, where the grave of General George S. Patton was to be found. I never thought I would see the general's grave, but it was a very important moment for me, as he ultimately commanded my father—since the 83rd was under the 3rd army whom Patton would command through the Ardennes to the Battle of the Bulge.

A second opportunity presented itself when another professional colleague of mine, Marietje (Maria) Kardaun, learned of my father's participation in the war and of the journeys I had made with Kristof to various forms of war memorials. Having known each other for close to eight years by 2014, she invited me to come to Maastricht the following summer, whereas she noted "A great American Cemetery from World War II" is very near to us." Some six months later I

accepted her invitation and made plans to visit Maastricht following our 2015 conference in Paris.

Prior to leaving for the conferences in Europe during the summer of 2015, I asked my dad for the names of the three fellow soldiers who were killed during the fateful mail run in World War II. He looked them up and told me Clarence Swarthy, James Bower, and Harold Parady. I told him I might see their graves while in Europe this summer, but I wasn't sure. Dad was cooperative in looking up the exact spelling of their names, but didn't say too much about my possible visit.

I did some initial searching on-line and had reason to believe these men were buried in the Netherlands-American Cemetery in Margraten, just 10 kilometers east of Maastricht. It turned out this was the cemetery that Maria had been speaking of.

In July of 2015, I arrived in Maastricht, was greeted by Maria and her husband and son. I settled into the extra apartment they had set aside for me near their house for the next four days.

However, the same day I arrived, Maria rather surprised me and said "Philip and I would like to take you up to the Netherlands-American Cemetery tomorrow, if you would like." I said "of course!"

The next day we departed in the morning, about 10:00 AM, for the Netherlands-American Cemetery. When we arrived, our visit began with seeing the memorial fountain at the entrance, as well as the memorial chapel just to the back and right side of it. I then left Philip and Maria and went into the cemetery office where I asked the American Officer on duty if "these members of the 83rd Infantry Division, Clarence Swartley, James Bower, and Harold Parady were buried here." The officer wrote the names down and came back with a short list of about 8-10 names. He confirmed that the men I had inquired about were interred there. He also stated that the

additional names on the list were other members of the 83rd Infantry Division who were buried there as well. The list contained the location of each burial. The officer provided me a cemetery map, and I asked and received some flags to place at the gravesites. Maria and Philip accompanied me as I first visited Clarence Swartley (PA), and then proceeded to the grave of James Bower (PA), and then concluded with a visit to the resting place of Harold Parady (CT). All three men had fallen on March 5, 1945. At each grave I planted the American flag, said some prayers, and made a final salute.

Upon conclusion of these visits, we departed the cemetery and I returned to the apartment. Later that day, I called my dad back in Cincinnati and told him I had visited the graves of Swartley, Bower, and Parady. He said “You actually saw their graves and visited them?” I responded yes. He started to break down for the first time in his life and said “we were all like brothers.” While I still had him on the phone I asked him if he knew any of the other deceased soldiers on the short list provided to me at the cemetery. When I mentioned John Rogers he was stunned. He said “Rogers is buried there too?” I said yes. He said, “He was shot right through the heart by a German sniper.” However, recalling these friends and fallen comrades was a little more than my dad was prepared to handle, and he would up passing the phone off to my sister, who told me he was crying. It was a tough moment for me as well, as when he had talked about these men in the past, it was as a story, from another time, and one without emotion.

The next day, I returned to the cemetery to visit John Rogers’s (CO) grave. While looking for his grave, a local gentleman named Smeets, who was with his granddaughter Meggie, asked if he could help me. I responded, “certainly”! He assisted me in finding John Rogers’ grave. Like the visit the day before, I placed a flag at his grave, said some prayers, and gave a final salute before departing. Mr. Smeets asked me if I was related to him (Rogers) and I responded: “He was with

my father in World War II but was shot by a Nazi sniper right through the heart.” He turned to his granddaughter and said “You see?” Mr. Smeets told me that once a year, he and his wife also attended a memorial concert held at the cemetery, and that his fellow citizens appreciated what the American soldiers did for them. We exchanged information, and then I suddenly found it difficult to talk. We shook hands and he left me at John Rogers’ grave.

I again called my father the night after my second visit to the cemetery, and once again, he fought back tears. Dad told me “he used to talk to Rogers regularly, but didn’t know he was from Colorado.” He repeated what he had said the day before but added: “He was shot through the heart; but at least he never knew what hit him.” He thanked me for visiting the graves of these men, and I told him I would see him when I got home.

Several weeks later when I had returned, I showed my dad the pictures of the graves of these men—and there was always one additional picture with me next to the cross with their names. Dad sat rather stoically through the pictures—and I think the whole thing seemed surreal to him. At one point after showing Swartley, Bower, and Parady’s graves he said, “we found out later they never even got a chance to open their mail.” However, when I was done showing the pictures and talking about my visit, he got up to walk away, and I saw him wipe his eyes.

The next year I attended a conference in Paris, and this put me in geographical proximity to the Brittany-American Cemetery, in which one last comrade dad used to talk about was buried. Originally, I was originally informed at the Netherlands-American Cemetery that Raymond Tann was there, but his listing there was in error. Indeed, the American officer had double-checked the information, and said “You’re right; he isn’t buried here, but in Brittany.” I remember dad saying that “It was a real shame about Tann. He kept telling the officers that he was sick, but he was told to suck it up and get back to duty.” My dad said he and other soldiers thought Tann had

stomach ulcers. Like the visits at the Netherlands-American cemetery the year before, at the Brittany-American Cemetery, I said some prayers and placed a flag at Raymond Tan's headstone. As the flag flew open in the wind, I raised my hand in salute, and as I slowly lowered my hand, so the flag on the grave faded in the wind, until my hand was by my side, so too was now the flag on Raymond Tann's flag completely still and motionless. It was a surreal feeling, and I've never forgotten it.

When I returned home, I showed my father the pictures of Raymond Tann's grave. This time he said very little and thanked me for having visited his grave and taken the picture. I think Tann's death was still somewhat of a mystery to him; not having been killed in action; he died and my father never learned what the official cause of death was. After visiting Raymond Tann's grave, I felt like I had completed a chapter, not only in my life, but in my father's as well. I felt I had visited these four fallen soldiers, the men whom he had never forgotten, on his behalf.

Over the years while in Ghent, I along with my friend and colleague Kristoff vonAssche, met up and returned by train for the Post Ceremony in Ypres, Belgium on three separate occasions. There we always visited Tyne Cot Cemetery, the largest Commonwealth Commissioned War Cemetery in the world. There we visited memorials and graveyards, culminating with the Last Post Menin Gate, which occurs every night at 8:00 or 20:00 PM and has so continuously since 1928 (Interrupted only by World War II). Here, visitors not only from Great Britain, but from other nations involved in World War II take part in a wreath-laying ceremony in the center of the memorial. Over my visits I've witness wreaths laid from people representing nations from Canada, to South Africa, to Australia, and even Germany. It has come to symbolize a shrine to all the souls from all nations, lost during the Great War.

While in Ypres, or Flanders Fields as it is also known in 2016, I learned more about the “Last Post Association.” After reading the information about the association, and my belief that I would return to Ypres in the future, I decided to join the association. I began to receive more detailed information about activities, memorial concerts, and other special events which occurred at the Menin Gate.

It soon became apparent to me how important it was that I had joined the Last Post Association when I did. At the beginning of 2018, the Last Post Association began publishing information about special memorial services to be held later that year on November 11, 2018, commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the Armistice. Having thought about my grandfather and great-uncle and the special meaning the Menin Gate and Ypres had for me, I began to take more interest in going to these services at the year progressed.

I was concerned about missing one...maybe two days at the university, and my classes were important to me. However, as time grew close, I decided I had to attend this gathering on November 11, 2018, and that it would only occur once in my lifetime. I was further relieved when I realized that the university would indeed be closed on Monday November 12, in observance of Veteran’s Day.

On September 27th, 2018, I finally sat down and booked a round trip flight from Cincinnati to Brussels and hoped that everything would work out. Soon after that day I entered the Last Post Association website and reserved two tickets for the memorial services under the Menin Gate along with other programmed activities. That evening I felt as though I had received some type of message that I had done the right thing. It was an episode of the Twilight Zone which really shook me. Out of the possible 156 episodes of the original series that could be broadcast on any given night, “The Last Flight” appeared before me on the television screen. For those of you

familiar with the series, it was the episode about a World War I British Pilot who flies out of the clouds, only to land in the 1950s, where he came to understand his contribution in the war.

Strange as it may sound, I took this as a sign that I had made the right decision to attend the memorial services on November 11, 2018.

I previously stated that I had bought two tickets for the November 11th remembrance ceremonies at Ypres. I added a second ticket in case my friend and colleague Kristof von Assche, now at the University of Antwerp, could join me for this day commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the Armistice—after all he had introduced me to this memorial and ceremony back in 2003.

Kristof's reply was affirmative, so in two days, everything seemed to be suddenly falling into place.

November came quickly, and the time for my journey had now arrived. I set up in a hotel in Ghent, as there was no accommodation available in or near Ypres. Very early on the morning of November 11th, I met up with Kristof at the train station in Ghent, and boarded a packed train bound for Ypres. Leaving the train, we made our way up to the Menin Gate and arrived there about 9:00 AM. The tickets I had allowed members of the Last Post Association to gather directly under the gate so they could have a close view of the special remembrance ceremony that day. At 10:00 AM, a “memorial parade” of various nations began moving through the Menin Gate. Contingents from nearly all participants of World War I were present, with a military delegation from Virginia representing the United States of America. For the next fifty-five minutes, troops and delegates marched solemnly through the Menin Gate. Then came a moment of great silence. At 11:00 AM, church bells in Ypres began ringing, recounting the Armistice which brought an end to the war, at exactly the same hour, day, and month one-

hundred years ago. It ended with the Last Post, sounded by trumpeters from the Ypres Fire-Department, who have carried on this voluntary tradition since 1928.

At 2:00 in the afternoon, we attended a memorial concert at St. Martin's Cathedral in Ypres. I didn't know what to expect at such a concert, but it featured some remarkable and talented individuals singing songs of dedication, remembrance, and sorrow in remembrance of the soldiers lost in the war. One moving song, titled "Walking the Dead," included a widescreen backdrop showing film clips and still pictures of the burial of fallen soldiers in World War I. Overall, it was a very somber and meaningful tribute to those soldiers who fell during the Great War.

Later that afternoon, we spent some time at the Flanders Fields Museum, viewing some of the special exhibits they had arranged for the 100th anniversary commemoration. To be sure, there was to be another Last Post at the traditional 8:00 (20:00) PM time that evening. There was nothing in print about the final Last Post. I knew that Kristof taught on Monday morning in Antwerp and asked him if he wanted to stay for the second Last Post. He said he did, and it wound up being a special Last Post, with a few surprises in store. On our way over to the Menin Gate shortly after 7:00 PM (19:00), Kristof saw a couple of rather large black cars, surrounded by the police. He immediately exclaimed; I think the King is here!. As we paused, then moved toward the Menin Gate, we were again asked to produce our tickets. After a brief but frantic search for my ticket, I located it in my jacket and moved forward.

That evening's Last Post was not the traditional 8:00 event. Most, but not all, of the Last Post members had remained for the final Last Post. It was clear that there was a special section under the Menin Gate was reserved though. Soon it became apparent that international diplomats based in Brussels had arrived and were there to lay wreaths and take part in the Last Post that

evening. However, shortly before 8:00 (20:00) PM, King Phillippe and his wife arrived and took their special places. After the sounding of the trumpets marking the commencement of the evening remembrance, several individuals spoke of the solemnness of the occasions.

On behalf of a grateful Belgian nation, King Phillippe and his wife proceeded to the middle of the gate to lay a large wreath. They were followed by the diplomats who all laid memorial wreaths. The Last Post of November 11, 2018 was then sounded, bringing to an end a spectacular day of remembrance. As the British expression goes, “Lest we forget.”

The events of that day held a great deal of meaning for me, and I will never forget that day, nor those who made the ultimate sacrifice, in perhaps the greatest tragedy of the 20th century, the Great War. These remembrances hold a special place not only in my mind but in my heart. I believe it is important for me to remember my grandfather and great-uncle during such commemorations, but also all of those who gave their lives or fought in the past, so that we many continue with our lives today

War and Remembrance has been an important part of my life. I grew up in a family tradition of remembering those who fought for us, especially in World War I and World War II.

Furthermore, my church and grade school served to reinforce these values learned within the family. Our church continued for years to ring the church bells every November 11th at 11:00, while my grade school required us to memorize the much beloved poem, *In Flanders Fields*. In 2008, I took my parents to the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. It was a meaningful and perhaps proud visit—especially for my father, when he saw, walked, and studied the great new memorial to all American who had fought in World War II. I was glad I was able to take them both on what probably proved to be our last distant road trip.

My studies of 20th century history in graduate school, along with the very fine colleague-friends I've made during my earlier years of academic conference participation, led to directly to experiencing first-hand, names and places I had only heard or read about. From war cemeteries in Europe to the Menin Gate in Ypres, I will always value these experiences and memories, which were made possible by the friends I met along the path of my academic journey. It has been exceptionally meaningful to have taken part in remembering those who have both served their nation or lost their lives doing so in these conflicts. Lest we forget.