WORLD WAR ONE CENTENARY: TIME TO VISIT NORMANDY? THAT WOULD BE WRONG

INTRODUCTION

Just over 100 years ago, on April 6, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany. War was declared on Austria – Hungary, Germany's primary ally, on December 7, 1917. This worldwide struggle, World War I, came to a close by Armistice agreed among the combatants, effective as of November 11, 1918.

Centenary celebrations, commemorations and tributes of various kinds have been and are being held all over the world during this Centenary period, bearing in mind that for most of the major belligerents, World War I began in August of 1914. These will terminate, presumably, in major events during 2018, leading up to the 100th Anniversary of the War's end on November 11, 2018.

Being a self-styled amateur historian, I have read fairly extensively in the popular historical literature available on the First World War, or "The Great War," "Le Grand Guerre," or the "War to End All Wars" as it is variously referred to. For all I have read, I have never come away with a sure, "black letter" answer as to who was actually responsible for starting it. "The Sleepwalkers" by Christopher Clark, published in 2012, is, I think, the best popular but extremely well researched and written history covering the long road to war. I finished that book thinking that the author blamed the Russians more than the Germans for starting it but that is my "Take" and not necessarily his. I am still not sure; the War's start can only be said to have been, cribbing from "Cool Hand Luke," caused by a "failure to communicate" on a truly colossal level. I know who ended up fighting in it. I know how it ended and I have a fair grasp of the terms of the Armistice, the major peace treaties (The Treaty of Versailles and the Treaty of St. Germain) and the direct and indirect consequences of those arrangements.

I now know that the number of casualties in this War exceeded 37 million, with over 17 million deaths and 20 million wounded (according to Wikipedia). Total military deaths, from all causes, among the major belligerents, break down as follows:

Nation.	Deaths.	% of Total Population
United Kingdom	890,000.	2%
France	1,400,000.	3.5%
Italy	651,000.	1.8%
Austria – Hungary	1,494,000.	3.0%
Germany	2,000,000.	3.08%
Turkey	772,000.	3.67%
U.S.A.	117,000.	0.00127%

Put another way, if the U.S., as a percentage of population, lost as many soldiers killed as France, Austria – Hungary, Germany or Turkey, our combat-related deaths would have been close to 3,000,000. Consider that all combat deaths in our four year Civil War, from both sides, amounted to 620,000 (2% of our then population), one could say that we were fortunate not to have entered World War I at the time it was commenced by the other major combatants.

World War I was a great human tragedy for various reasons, but primarily due to the fact that it need not and should not have happened at all and, having happened, those still alive at its end were arguably worse off for its having been fought. A truer tribute to human folly cannot be found in history.

World War I was the greatest, conflict – driven catastrophic world event up until 1939. This was so on many levels, apart from the sheer loss of life. It is fair to say that, but for that conflict, we would not have – for better or worse – the world we have today. Having that notion rolling around in my head, driven by curiosity and a desire to determine how and why this conflict was so brutal, wondering about its ongoing effects, and recognizing the importance of this Centenary period, I set out to visit as many of the major, Western Front (Belgium and France) historic sites, memorials, battlefields, commemoratives and cemeteries as I could, given the time I had.

This brings me to the "Normandy" reference in the title of this piece. Before leaving on my trip, I had conversations with people about it. More than once, I was asked if I planned to visit Normandy as part of my tour coverage. Indeed, I have visited Normandy, on three separate occasions. It is hallowed ground, the beaches, the American Cemetery, the Pointe du Hoc and all the rest but of course in connection with a different war. To say this, in print, sounds patronizing and condescending, and it is, or at least it is to anyone with passable knowledge about World War II, if not World War I. My opinion on the state of American knowledge of and interest in World War I will become clear as I progress.

As I planned my trip I wondered: In the United States in 2017, who among us "knows" about World War I, why, how and when America fought in it, what were the causes for which this War was fought, and what is its continuing significance to citizens of the United States? Do most or many Americans know how catastrophic a conflict it was, and not just in purely human terms? Being American, I thought in terms of other Americans but how similar or dissimilar are our attitudes to those of, say, our major allies in that conflict, the British and the French?

My trip was colored by the very basest of approaches to the struggle I meant to study: combat – related death and survival. In 1914, the nations of Europe had not had a major war since 1870 (and that was very brief), setting aside "brush fire" flare ups and various Balkan skirmishes. The United States had only fought one major war in all of its existence (setting aside the relatively minor, in terms of casualties, War of 1812 and the Mexican American War): The Civil War, which had ended 49 years earlier. Big and bad, the tactics of that War were the textbooks for those responsible for fighting America's side when she entered World War I. While the tactics in battle remained essentially unchanged from what they had been for decades, the means of fighting a war had changed dramatically, primarily in the forms of super-efficient machine guns and massive, powerful and effective artillery weapons, not to forget the advent of poison gas.

I planned and carried out my "Great War Expedition" with a focus on those immediate, catastrophic, life and death effects. I focused on the Western Front and, specifically, the major engagements involving the Germans, on the one hand, and the British Commonwealth (Battles of Ypres, The Somme and Arras), the French (Chemin des Dames and Verdun), and the Americans (Belleau Wood, Chateau Thierry, and the Meuse – Argonne) on the other.

YPRES SALIENT

The British (with some Belgian and French support) and the Germans fought in and around Ypres (a small city in southwest Belgium, now called "Ieper") for almost the entirety of The Great War. There were at least five separate "Battles of Ypres" (actually the "Ypres Salient") during that period. The city of Ypres was destroyed amid countless civilian casualties. The British Commonwealth suffered over 570,000 casualties, an amazing number of whom were never found, so many being literally destroyed by weaponry. Such was the slaughter in and around Ypres that after the war, there was an active movement among British opinion makers (not least Churchill and King George V) to preserve Ypres as a "memorial ruin." Luckily – at least for those of us who came later – that did not happen.

To prove the point, the Menin Gate Memorial in Ypres (think virtual Arc de Triomphe in scale) contains the names of 55,000 British soldiers who died but who have no known grave. The Gate's design was finished before the fighting ended, too late for 35,000 additional names which had to be added to a commemorative wall built at the nearby Tyne Cot Commonwealth Cemetery. 90,000 names of soldiers never found! Of the 12,000 plus Commonwealth burials at Tyne Cot (the biggest Commonwealth Cemetery in the world), 8300 are unknowns. That is human destruction on an industrial scale.

I drove the 70 kilometer Ypres Salient Auto Route, visiting battle sites, cemeteries and memorials to the Commonwealth, German, Belgian and French fallen. The Route is roughly circular, starting in Ypres and fanning out north, north east and east of town. This was war on a massive but static scale, with the village of Passchendaele (northeast of Ypres) the classic example. The Third Battle of Ypres, initiated by the British, is also known as the Battle of Passchendaele, fought over three months in the summer and fall of 1917. The results: A British advance of 8 kilometers at a cost of 250,000 men killed, wounded or missing (25% of the troops engaged), not to mention the legacy of a lunar landscape for miles in every direction.

ARRAS REGION AND VIMY RIDGE

I used Arras, a small city in northeast France, as my "base" for travel to Ypres, the Somme area and areas around Arras itself. Arras was effectively destroyed in the Great War and just as effectively rebuilt. The British famously initiated the Battle of Arras in 1917 by secreting 24,000 troops in interconnected, massive cellars and caverns. At H Hour these troops safely entered the battlefield, east of town, from the cover of their underground haven. Visitors today can enter the Wellington Quarry Memorial in Arras and get a sense of how the troops carried on, waiting for the "big push." Safe entry to the battlefield did not ensure victory and the British effort at Arras was inconclusive at best, notwithstanding the casualties incurred.

Much of my time in the Arras area was spent visiting the nearby Vimy Ridge battlesite and Memorial(an homage to Canadian gallantry), the huge Notre Dame de Lorette French Cemetery and the Circuit of Remembrance across the road from the Cemetery.

The Vimy Ridge Memorial includes a Museum, the battlesite (including large "no go" areas due to unexploded ordnance), trenches, tunnels and the magnificent Memorial. The latter sits on the Ridge itself and can only be approached obliquely (again, unexploded ordnance bars the direct route). The names of 11,285 Canadians are carved onto the stones of the Memorial. A Canadian Guide at the Museum said she was one of 18 Canadians who serve four month tours in France, rotating between service at Vimy and the Newfoundland Memorial at Beaumont – Hamel within the Somme Battlefield area. One hundred years on, these guide positions are much prized by young Canadian volunteers. According to the Guide, Canadians attach great significance and deference to the heroes of Vimy since,

as they see it, a young Canada essentially welded itself into nationhood in that battle that led to the seizure of the Ridge from the Germans (all other previous Allied attempts having failed).

The nearby Notre Dame de Lorette French Cemetery is the largest French National Cemetery dedicated to the dead of "Le Grande Guerre:" 40,000 dead of whom half are in mass ossuaries onsite – again the continuing leitmotif of death on an industrial scale. Across the road, and opened by the French in 2016, is an amazing and jaw dropping memorial "homage" to the military dead of The Great War: The Circle of Remembrance. The Circle is actually a giant ellipse about an eighth of a mile around, containing thousands of vertical slabs listing the names of every soldier who fought and died in the Nord Pas de Calais area in World War I: 558,000 names. I stopped at the series of slabs containing the names of all the dead "Smith's," hundreds and hundreds of them. The Circle has only one opening, a spot which, when I visited, had an eerie wind blowing through, as I looked out on now silent, and somewhat restored (by nature), but once savage battlefields from 100 years ago. The Circle has a peculiar, but fitting, dedication: "This memorial was erected in a peaceful Europe in memory of a terrible tragedy which devastated a generation of young men who, for the most part, could read and write."

THE SOMME

I did considerable pre – trip reading and planning in preparation for my all day (and evening) spent in the Somme battlefield which lies east/northeast and southeast of the City of Amiens, in and around the Somme River Valley. While the area was fought over, off and on, for much of the war, "the Somme" is synonymous with the great battle initiated there by the British, starting on July 1, 1916 and lasting almost to year end. These battles did more to weaken the British Army, the nation and the Commonwealth than anything before or since. History says those wounds were largely self – inflicted. Like the Ypres Salient, an auto – drive tour of the Somme battlefields encompasses 60 to 70 kilometers and took me a very long day to cover. There I saw trenches, and massive shell craters, the towns destroyed and rebuilt, the cemeteries and monuments that are now only starting to truly register in my mind, as I write these words.

Apparently the motivating idea for the Battle was to bloody the Germans on the Somme to relieve pressure on the French who were in their own death struggle with Germany at Verdun. The British General, Sir Douglas Haig, commenced the Battle on July 1, 1916 with the British Army suffering 60,000 casualties on that day alone. It is known as the worst single day in the long, storied history of the British Army. The Commonwealth Memorial at Thiepval captures a sense of the tragedy: 72,205 names carved in stone of soldiers whose bodies were never found.

The Newfoundland Monument at Beaumont – Hamel and the South African Monument at Longueval do as well. The Newfoundland Regiment went into battle on July 1 at 780 strong and, a half hour later, its strength was 110. This was explained to me, again, by another young Canadian volunteer guide, a colleague to the group at Vimy Ridge. The Memorial itself is a stunning place, with trenches, monuments, "no go" areas, all dominated by the mighty Caribou Monument – the symbol of Newfoundland – on a raised mount set just above the main Newfoundlanders trench. At Delville Wood, near Longueval, the South African 1st Infantry Brigade – 121 officers and 3032 men – was tasked with taking and holding the Wood. After six days, they had the Wood but the Brigade had been reduced to 742 officers and men. Many of those who died in those battles were never recovered and are still there, in unmarked and unknown locations.

British Commonwealth soldiers fought similar battles all over the Somme area, as did the French south of the River. The battlefields encompassed many, many miles and, after six months, the British had advanced about 8 miles. Their Army had suffered 420,000 casualties with the Germans probably suffering the same or more. It has been said that approximately 3,000,000 soldiers participated in the Battle of the Somme, with 1,200,000 killed, wounded or missing (again, so many missing due to their evisceration by weapons used against them). In the Somme area alone, there are 410 British Commonwealth Cemeteries, 22 French and 14 German. One can only guess at the staggering number of those who died who are unknown.

I drove east from Arras to the Argonne Forest area, the latter intended as my "base" for the next phase of my trip. En route, I visited the seemingly rarely visited (I got there at noon, as the second visitor that day; the Cemetery Director guessed that I was his last "customer" for that day) Somme American Cemetery (over 1800 burials, opened in 1937) near St. Quentin and the battle sites along the famous (infamous?) Chemin des Dames plateau.

THE CHEMIN DES DAMES

The Chemin des Dames, or "ladies walk", was hardly that in the spring of 1917 when over 1,000,000 French troops slammed into entrenched German forces along the approximately 30 kilometer plateau which runs east to west between Reims and St. Quentin. The result, other than 187,000 French casualties – about the same for the Germans – in about three weeks of fighting, was, militarily speaking, something of a "draw." Strategically, the Chemin des Dames was a disaster for the French: Many units thereafter mutinied (which dangerously spread) and the French commander, Nivelle, was fired and sent to North Africa. French soldiers had fought for three years by this time with little to show for it. True, Paris was never occupied but the war was still being fought on French (and Belgian) soil, not German. The big German offensives of the spring of 1918 were yet to come.

I stopped in Cerny – en – Laonnois, a small village about half way along the Chemin road, and the site of beautifully maintained memorials and adjoining French and German cemeteries (I stood with, literally, one foot in each, at one point), dedicated to soldiers who died in the 1917 fighting. I was directed to the grave of Corporal Albert Truton, "morts pour la France 18-8-1917," and said to be one of the mutineers shot as an example to others, presumably on the orders (or under the command influence) of General Petain, General Nivelle's successor.

VERDUN

Verdun is synonymous with death and destruction on an indescribable scale. I visited the city some years ago but, not having enough time to satisfy my interest, I resolved to go back if I ever had the chance. The Great War Centenary and time itself have effected changes in the battle sites. Verdun, astride the Meuse, was not "the" battle site as such but was seriously impacted by the battle which raged for ten months, primarily on the heights northeast of the Meuse, a few kilometers from the city center. This time, I approached Verdun from Bar Le Duc, a city south of Verdun and the starting point for the "Voie Sacree," or "sacred road." "Sacred" it was during the Verdun battle, constituting Verdun's sole lifeline to the outside world: Men and supplies moved northward while dead, wounded and empty lorries came back south, all along a 35 kilometer, one way road. Today, red and white road monuments dot the route as you drive along.

The German attack at Verdun in February, 1916 was intended to bleed the French Army white and knock France out of the war. Ten months and 1,000,000 casualties (on both sides) later, the French were still in the war and still in effective control of the heights of Verdun. 10,000,000 shells had been fired, the ground and vast numbers of people, military and civilian, pulverized in a tactical "draw" but a strategic victory for the French.

I visited Verdun sites that I had visited before: The Ossuaire – repository of the intermingled remains of 130,000 unidentified French and German soldiers; Forts Douamont and Vaux; and several of the "villages detruit." There are nine "destroyed villages" on the Verdun heights, none of which was ever rebuilt. The streets of those vanished hamlets are laid out, with markers designating the locations of homes, farms, businesses and churches. The inhabitants of all nine were, in some cases, literally blown away. Others moved under great duress and never returned. Sentimentality aside, it was often dangerous to return since unexploded ordnance, in great quantities, still lurks in the ground all around the battle sites, even as trees have returned and transformed the landscape to green from lunar gray.

Those "destroyed" villages" are now my most poignant memory of Verdun, having displaced the site that had occupied "pride of place:" The "Tranchees des Baionnettes." Originally, one came upon the Trench Memorial only to see, protruding from the ground, a precise row of fixed bayonets, knowing that at the other end of these were French "poilus" who had all died instantly, where they stood, killed by an exploding shell. The French Government memorialized them, as they were, and so they were displayed. In intervening years, enterprising thieves stole the bayonets. Crosses were then placed in their stead and these too were stolen. Finally, crosses were again emplaced and a concrete barrier situated atop the trench to discourage further thievery. Consequently, due to human knavery, the Trench Memorial has lost most of its "shock and awe" value.

In the evening, I stood at the middle of the main Verdun bridge over the Meuse and took in the scene. The Meuse was tranquil, the city, with its "Victory Monument" and ancient gate is attractive, and there are signs directing one to the "World Center for Peace" which has been established there. The city's public spaces are replete with posters, monuments and other tributes to "international friendship, comity, and fraternity" and all the old verities and virtues. German and French leaders change, from time to time, and invariably they meet in Verdun to declare, apparently sincerely, eternal comradeship. I stand on that bridge and look up at the heights across the river to the northeast and think of Verdun, what it was, what it represented and represents, and what it now seems to be: Ground zero for world – wide expressions of grief, hope and contrition – a living, breathing, self – perpetuating catharsis.

AMERICAN BATTLE SITES AND MEMORIALS

Over three days I visited locations in northeastern France, big and small, commemorative of America's contribution to allied victory in World War I: Belleau Wood; Chateau Thierry; Montsec; Montfaucon; Aisne – Marne Cemetery and Memorial; Oise – Aisne Cemetery and Memorial; the Meuse – Argonne battlefields, Cemetery and Memorial; the "Sergeant York Trail"; the ravine from which emerged the famed "Lost Battalion"; and, last but not least, the site (in a remote farm field) where, in June of 1918, Quentin Roosevelt (Teddy's son) died when his plane was brought down by German fighter planes.

Each and every site was, in "Michelin Travel Guide speak," "worth a detour." Each gave me a distinct thrill and each extracted a quantity of other emotions: pride, admiration and sadness. These places are, in their own ways and in every way, beautiful and moving. I wondered why it took me so long to come and why Americans do not come or apparently plan to come, Centenary or no?

BELLEAU WOOD AND AISNE – MARNE CEMETERY/MEMORIAL

The Belleau Wood battle (southeast of Reims) inflicted more casualties on the U.S. Marine Corps, in a matter of days, then the Corps had cumulatively suffered in all of its existence, up to that time (early summer of 1918). The Aisne – Marne Cemetery site sits at the foot of Belleau Wood. Together they make for a stunning setting, worthy of a special trip just to seem them, if nothing else. One can walk all around the Wood, on a marked circuit, as well as the Cemetery/Memorial, and be virtually guaranteed to have these hallowed places to him or herself.

CHATEAU THIERRY AND OISE – AISNE CEMETERY/MEMORIAL

Chateau Thierry, not far from Belleau Wood as the crow flies, sits on the Marne River and was a critical battle site during the Second Battle of the Marne in the summer of 1918. It was at Chateau Thierry that the famed U.S. Third Division ("The Rock of the Marne") stopped the German advance. Some, certainly any French person who cares to talk about it, say that the Unites States' victories at Chateau Thierry and Belleau Wood stopped the Germans from entering Paris and likely ending the war with a German victory. The Marne at Chateau Thierry looked peaceful and beautiful when I recently visited. Chateau Thierry, the city, boasts many sights, not least the American Chateau Thierry Battle Monument on the heights outside of town and the American Memorial Church, next door to City Hall. The Church was built in 1924 to commemorate those Americans killed at Chateau Thierry and later in other battles fought nearby.

Over 6000 heroes lie at Oise – Aisne American Cemetery near Chateau Thierry, many of those having died in staving off the Germans' last throw of the dice in a last attempt to knock the British or the French out of the War. I walked all over the grounds, by myself, and also found, at grave number B91S, the grave of the American poet Joyce Kilmer. Oddly, the engraved information on his tombstone had been "mildly defaced" by someone who had packed wet sand in all the engravings' letters and numbers. I call it "mild defacement" because the damage was not lasting but someone had to bring the sand from a long way, since I saw none within the bounds of the Cemetery.

MONTSEC

Montsec Monument, near St. Mihiel, (not far from Verdun) sits on a magnificent butte that, in the summer of 1918, was the initial focus of the American – initiated Battle of the St. Mihiel Salient. The butte, just inside the Salient, was fiercely defended by the Germans due to its commanding view of the countryside. Today, one approaches the butte and sees the Monument from a great distance and, as it grows larger, seeing it so reminded me of my first sighting of Mont St. Michel many years before. You see each from so far away and they are constantly in view as they gradually loom larger on the horizon.

MONTFAUCON AND MEUSE ARGONNE CEMETERY/MEMORIAL

The Montfaucon battlefield, east and north of Verdun, was at the heart of U.S. General John J. Pershing's Meuse Argonne Offensive, initiated in the fall of 1918 and continuing until War's end.The site consists of vestiges of the battle (German pillboxes and other defenses), a magnificent memorial column and, in the shadow of the column, the ruins of a medieval church. Those ruins, juxtaposed with the column, are an arresting sight. On closer inspection of the church, I saw that those inventive Germans had actually constructed a heavily fortified defensive position literally integrated into the church's

remains. It faced down the slope at Montfaucon and surely wreaked havoc with the Americans attempting to make their way up that slope.

Many of the Americans who died at Montfaucon are interred at the nearby Meuse Argonne Cemetery near Romagne sous Montfaucon. It is the biggest American cemetery in Europe (14,246 burial stones) and it is so large that it is divided into eight sections. Like all sites such as this, it is beautifully maintained. I walked the entire site, including the Cemetery, the Memorial Loggia, the Chapel and the Visitors House. I was alone the entire time, save for the 14,246 heroes resting nearby.

QUENTIN ROOSEVELT

At the expense of "copycatism," I here narrate my own experience in visiting the Quentin Roosevelt Memorial. I am a "copy cat" since I first read about the Memorial in a fine New York Times article written by Richard Rubin in October, 2014. He vividly described the site and his difficulty in finding it. That article stayed with me such that I resolved to visit that site if I ever found myself in the area. I went to the village of Chamery and saw the Quentin Roosevelt Fountain, described also by Rubin, which had been built from funds provided by the Roosevelt Family. The location of Quentin's plane crash was nearby, according to Rubin. I enlisted the aid of three French teenaged boys from Chamery who indeed led me to the site, after a mile long walk through unmarked fields, far removed from the nearest highway. No outsider could find this site without help, divine or otherwise, forgetting the fact that we were trespassing on private property to get to the site (the site is also on private land).

The Memorial is a good sized stone (perhaps a yard wide and two and a half feet tall) on which was engraved the bare details of Quentin Roosevelt's death: "Here fell 1st Lt Quentin Roosevelt 95th SQ 1st Pursuit Gp American Expeditionary Force July 14, 1918." Nearby is a smaller stone which recites that the Roosevelt stone was "Erected as a memorial by the 302nd Engineers." Both stones were well maintained and each had small French and American flags crossed at their fronts.

I was in a farm field, standing there with three French kids who spoke no English but we all seemed happy to be there together, even though they'd obviously been there before and probably thought I was a truly "crazy Americain" for wanting to traipse out into that field (and paying them for guiding me there). Thanks to Richard Rubin and those three kids, I would not have had a successful trip without that traipse. Teddy Roosevelt was a larger than life figure who had captured my imagination. His youngest son, like all his children, meant so much to him and to many Americans at the time. Quentin's death was a national tragedy then and it affected me greatly out there in that field. The Roosevelt Fountain in Chamery was later supplemented by his mother's donation of a bible, in his honor, which I saw on display at the American Church in Chateau Thierry. Ironically, and fittingly, Quentin's body was later moved to the Normandy American Cemetery where he was laid to rest next to his brother, Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., who died in Normandy shortly after D Day in 1944.

IMPRESSIONS

Thinking about Quentin Roosevelt's death, and my visit to that site, caused me to recall all I had done over the previous several days wherein I had visited memorials, cemeteries and battle sites where hundreds and thousands had died or were honored. I do not consider myself a morbid person so why such a focus on loss and the death of so many? I boil it down to a series of competing emotions and notions:

(1) The British, French and Germans went to war in 1914 when they shouldn't have and needn't have. Yet, when they committed to fight, they sacrificed an entire generation in an attempt to achieve their goals. The men of that generation, for the most part, were willing and gallant supporters of and believers in those goals, apparently willing to die to achieve them. In hindsight, the causes for which these three nations fought were just about as flawed as the bases for which they went to war in the first place. So, my visit was about tragedy, a shake your head in dismay sort of tragedy. I was something of a later day witness to a tragedy that should have and arguably could have been avoided. That, of course, magnified the extent of the tragedy and drew me to it as surely as the so called "moth to the flame."

(2) The Americans went to war reluctantly, after three years. Every American commemorative site I visited spoke to the nobility of the American soldier and his cause, the great victories fought and won with tenacity and sacrifice, the blood and death experienced in a worthy cause. Surely the cause was worthy because the sites, the monuments and memorials are extraordinary and most impactful on the affected senses. They literally "moved" me, even though the lawyer in me tried to remain objective, if not skeptical. Much revisionist history has been published about Woodrow Wilson, not least about his racism, and the likelihood that, due to a debilitating stroke, others secretly ran the country in his stead for much of his second term, at least that part which played out after the war's end.

(3) I think it is fair to say that Wilson's motivations for entering the War were, by his and history's lights, decent if misguided. He was naïve in thinking he could make the world a better place if he could just get his way with those stone faced Allies of his. How to convince those Allies, who among them had lost more than 3,000,000 dead and many millions more wounded, permanently maimed or missing? Wilson, in lawyer's language, needed "standing." He needed to show that he belonged at the bargaining table as an equal, once the War ended. Americans actually started fighting in Europe in May of 1918 (May 28th to be exact) and fought from then on until November 11th, a total of 137 days. In those 137 days, 117,000 Americans died. Putting that in perspective, that is more than twice the number of American deaths suffered in many, many years of fighting in the Vietnam War. In the approximately 1320 days that Americans fought in World War 2, the United States suffered 417,000 battle deaths, or 315 per average day. In World War 1, the average daily death rate was 854. That was a whole lot of dying in a very short time.

(4) The Americans fought against Germans who had been fighting for almost four years. One could argue that the Germans had the advantage in experience (while being on the defensive, essentially). On the other hand, the Germans were close to being bled white by 1918, while the Americans were literally fresh off the boat. General Pershing apparently was very critical of trench warfare and believed he could triumph by fighting and winning a war of maneuver, at the same time keeping the bulk of American forces as a separate fighting organization, in the charge of American commanders.

(5) The bulk of American dying came during offensives at and around the St. Mihiel Salient and in the curtain – dropper Meuse – Argonne Offensive that carried on until Armistice Day. Having made my trip and "seen the sites," I as a totally armchair historian came away feeling that, for all the gallantry and glory, it is quite possible that the War would have ended at more or less the same time, with the same result, if America had avoided essentially all offensive operations and taken an "active defensive posture," leaving the Germans in no doubt that, in terms of manpower, they had no chance with 4,000,000 Americans in uniform, most of whom could be committed to battle against them, if necessary.

(6) So, about those 117,000 dead American servicemen, talented American war generals were in short supply in 1918. Fighting men were not. Wilson and the Americans would earn their seat

at the bargaining table not by sailing to France in order to go on the defensive, daring the Germans to try something. So, fight they did, shouldering their way past the French and into the ring with the Germans, who gave as good as they got. Wilson got his seat at the table – for all the good it did him and his causes – and we have the battle monuments, cemeteries and memorials to prove it.

(7) I started my journey with a round of visits to major British Commonwealth battle sites and all were subjects of very active visitation. The Channel is no barrier so travel to these sites is relatively easy. Besides, there are so many sites, memorials and monuments to visit! So much loss to commemorate and remember. This level of visitation is no fluke. Several years ago I spent a full day at Gallipoli in the month of February: the place was buzzing with Commonwealth visitors as well as Turks. The French battle sites were less crowded even though the ones I visited, save for one (a French cemetery in Belgium) were in France, Verdun being the major exception. It may be that the latter's name still reverberates so loudly that people still cannot not visit. Plus, not all of Verdun's visitors were French by any means. Why so many Commonwealth visitors to the British sites but not so many French visitors to the French sites? Timing? Does this reflect or reveal something in their respective national characters. I cannot believe that the French collectively care less. Maybe they internalize their sense of tragedy and choose not to put on display.

(8) Then there is the singular phenomenon common to all those glorious American sites that I visited. I made stops at: the Somme American Cemetery; Chateau Thierry; Belleau Wood; the Aisne – Marne Memorial and Cemetery; the Oise – Aisne Cemetery and Memorial; Montsec American Monument; Montfaucon American Monument; the Meuse – Argonne Monument and Cemetery; the Sergeant York Trail; and the Lost Battalion Memorial. At virtually every stop, I was the lone visitor, standing at and in those solemn locations with silence all around. The feeling I had was akin to a "buzz" or a "high" generated by the strangeness of having all that history, all that suffering, all that loss, all that – what – "fate of nations,"all to myself. As I travelled from one site to another, I became filled with anticipation and spoiled by the notion that I would have the next "grand place" to myself but also negatively impacted by the notion that no one would be there to share my experience. In most cases, not even a French groundskeeper was in sight. Where was everybody? Millions of Americans visit Europe, and France in particular, every year but they apparently do not visit, and do not think about visiting, these sacred and hallowed places.

(9) Apart from Normandy, there are relatively few physical locations for Americans to visit that so readily afford one the opportunity, as an American, to make a commemorative gesture in connection with American participation in the Second World War. That War, unlike The Great War, was a war of maneuver. One thinks about the other great World War Two battles that Americans fought in: The Bulge, Hurtgen Forest, Anzio and Salerno, Monte Cassino and so many others (in Western Europe and, not to forget, in the Pacific). In terms of visitation by present day Americans, these places give one very little to work with. By contrast, it is precisely that The Great War as fought on the Western Front was such a static conflict, lasting over four years, that many of the sites, memorials and related commemorations are literally etched into the geography. In many cases, man made embellishments have been created to add context, information and the full weight of historic relevance.

(10) As I have said already in so many words, Americans appear to be staying away in droves from the many, many physical relics of American participation in The Great War. Is this because Americans feel that these places have nothing to teach or to say to them that is relevant? Or, is it the case that most Americans do not know enough to know what they don't even know? I cannot help but compare my experience in meeting those excited, motivated young Canadian

Guides at the Vimy Ridge Memorial and Beaumont Hamel with the absence of Americans - any Americans, whether young or old – at the sights that all of us should remember and hold figuratively close to our hearts. At the expense of being labeled a hand wringer who dwells unnecessarily in the past, I believe that Americans are doing a grave injustice to this Centenary period and we are doing an injustice to ourselves as well. We are wrong not to take the time to reflect on what a world – wide disaster The Great War was, and the impact that that conflict has on us today, and the all – important lessons it continues to teach us, if we would but pay attention.

FINAL THOUGHTS

So, some Canadians feel that The Great War has great significance to them since it served to weld Canada into a nation. Perhaps American disinterest in that conflict must mean that it did not "make" us what we are today and, for that reason, is not deserving of our attention. What other events do people believe "made us what we are"? World War Two is the likely, ready answer. Thinking harder on that point, we emerged from World War One as the single most powerful and influential nation in the world. World War One lead to the dismemberment of the world order that had essentially been in place since the fall of Napolean I. It lead, inexorably, to the rise of Nazi Germany and the Soviet State – the temporary triumphs and the terrible legacy of totalitarianism. In short, we would not have the world we now have, with all its pluses and its many, many minuses, if The Great War had not happened.

There are many reasons why the World War One Centenary is a non – event in the United States and these same reasons are at the heart of our collective disinterest in the War itself. The Civil War is still with us, with reminders of that spilling out in our daily news. The Lost Cause/White Supremacists' arguments about statues and place names are thrust to the forefront of our thinking. Why? Perhaps that is in part due to the fact that substantial time is devoted to educating Americans about the Civil War, both in our schools and "at our parents/family members knees," so to speak. Also, that war lasted four long years and was fought on our soil. It is there, for so many of our black and white citizens, and so much so that it has become part of our cultural DNA.

World War 1, on the other hand, has had little apparent impact, if at all, on our culture, our mindset, our views of ourselves and the world, even though it was a world altering (including our world) event. Where are the World War 1 Monuments on the National Mall? There are none. There is one World War 1 "national" Museum, located in Kansas City. How many know of its existence?

World War 2, on the other hand, saw the victory of a totalitarian state and the creation of a Two – Power adversarial system, the Cold War nuclear confrontation that lasted for decades. World War 2 saw the defeat of the most ignoble totalitarian state known to history and The Holocaust. World War 2 ended in Asia in nuclear conflagration. Big, big events no doubt but none of this would have occurred if not for World War 1. So, there are arguably "big lessons" to be learned regarding World War 1, its conclusion and consequences and also its causes. Yet, none of this is discussed anywhere that I am aware of – at least not seriously and at length – save possibly in some graduate seminar by a handful of history students seeking credit toward an advanced degree (probably on a subject not related to The Great War).

Why are things this way, this ignorance, disinterest and utter lack of curiosity? For us, the consequences of a "loss" in World War I, or even of nonparticipation, would arguably not have been that severe. If

Germany had won, there would have been a weakened France and England (would either have been occupied?), a wobbly and still disintegrating Austria – Hungarian Empire, a Soviet Union that would have been as weak as it ended up being (for a considerable period after 1917), but still viable (with a terror apparatus still in place to maintain control). The United States would have remained "safe" for the time being. So win or lose, participate or not, the United States would still be what it came to be, right?

I recently had a conversation with an acquaintance and I related the highlights of my trip to him. He said that, years back, he had taken his family to Verdun. After only a short time there, his children urged him to leave. Why? Those memorial sights encompassing all that death and destruction made the children uncomfortable and downright upset. They could not wait to leave so they left. For them, The Great War, commenced almost by accident but leaving so much death, destruction and drastic political and economic destruction in its wake, was simply too much to deal with.

So, perhaps, the explanation I seek is that, in our eyes, World War 1 was a historical aberration to be driven, quickly and finally, from our collective consciousness. One can easily suppress it and wish it away, one hundred years on, as if it never happened. If it happened, then…well…at this stage of our collective existence it has become an obsolete fact. Perhaps there is an exception to Faulkner's well – remembered aphorism that "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Maybe this part of our past is fast becoming, or has become, dead to us.

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