

The Veterans of World War I: Remembrance and History

Gene E. Fax

Delivered at the George Washington Memorial Chapel,
Valley Forge, PA, May 28, 2017

Thank you, Nancy, for your generous introduction, and thank you to the Board of the Descendants and Friends of the 314th Infantry Regiment for inviting me to speak in this most historic place. Thank you also to Reverend Almquist for allowing me to share your podium. The men and women at this gathering understand better than most the meaning of Memorial Day, and it is an honor to address one of the few regimental associations, perhaps the only one, that keeps alive the memory of its service in World War I.

The best-known writer on how we remember war is the late Paul Fussell, an American literary scholar and a decorated veteran of World War II. In his principal work, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, published in 1975, he describes how the British took pains to glorify the catastrophe of the war using heroic terms from literature and myth. Thus, “friend” became “comrade,” “horse” became “steed,” “danger” became “peril,” “conquer” became “vanquish.” If Fussell had written about the American experience, he would have had a harder time making his point. Americans, for the most part, used simple prose to describe the war; their accounts of battles tended to be straightforward and matter-of-fact. High-flown rhetoric was rare. But Fussell observed something that I think applies to Americans as well. Surveying the British war cemeteries, he contrasted the neat, orderly rows of headstones with the horrific conditions under which the men beneath those

headstones fought and died. For me this contrast describes the difference between remembrance—our effort to impose order and meaning on the past—and history, which is our attempt to describe chaos. It is this difference that I want to talk about.

The way Americans remember the war has changed over the years. To the returning veterans it was important that their sacrifice and accomplishments, and especially their dead comrades, be memorialized for future generations. The result was a proliferation of monuments and other war memorials. These were strictly local affairs. The federal government, which built elegant monuments and cemeteries in Europe, played no role domestically, except for the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. It provided no funding, no designs, no suggested inscriptions, not even lists of the dead. No official account of the war was ever written, except for a large and unedited collection of Army documents published long afterward. Memory was based in the community and reflected each locality's outlook. Some towns commissioned statues of determined doughboys advancing with fixed bayonets, or of solemn soldiers putting a wreath on a grave. Others put up simple plaques with the names of the dead. The 314th, as you well know, rebuilt its old log cabin from Camp Meade as a memorial here at Valley Forge, close to the homes of its original recruits. The public message everywhere was, "These were *our* boys, *our* neighbors, and *our* ancestors who did great things." For many years, almost everyone recognized the names of Belleau Wood, Sergeant York, the Lost Battalion, and the Meuse-Argonne. But as the Depression deepened and conflict in Europe loomed again, memories faded. The scale and drama of the Second World War put

the First in the shade. Until recently even many members of national veterans; groups such as the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars had only a hazy recollection of the events of 1918. For many decades most people have had a vague impression of the war as merely a waste of blood and effort. The Centennial has excited a welcome amount of renewed interest and activity. But few citizens nowadays can tell you what the struggle was about.

So why is it important to remember the war and the men and women who took part in it? The standard answers have been: So it won't happen again. Because it led to World War II. Because we are now re-living the same divisive nationalism that caused it. Those may be legitimate reasons, but they are not why we are here today. Those who know of the 314th remember the war from the inside, in terms of individuals, the same way as did the cities and towns to which the veterans returned. We recall the service and sacrifice of our parents, now more often our grand- and great-grandparents. We recall how their devotion to duty made possible our freedom and our prosperity. Whether they worked a machine gun in a trench or a typewriter in an office, we are proud of them. And not just that; we would want *them* to be proud of *us*. We like to think that, if they were magically to appear before us, they would look at us and say, "Yes, you are the descendants I wanted to have. You carry my hopes and my values. Even if I never knew you, you are the people I fought for, and I'm glad I did." We try to behave a little more carefully, a little more caringly, a little more nobly, because in our minds *they* are watching *us*. That is what remembrance is for.

History is different. History accepts no summary declarations about the past. Its essence is to challenge every statement with the question, “How do we know this?” Historians are not satisfied with second-hand accounts. They are not even satisfied with original documents. Given an eyewitness description of a meeting, a decision, or a battle, they examine it, they question it, they ask, “Is this witness reliable?” “Is there another version of this story that I need to consider?” “Does this narrative match up with other things we know, or does it contradict them?”

Let us see what happens when we apply the historical method in two cases. The first is the assault of the 314th Infantry on the morning of September 27, 1918. This is the attack that finally took the hill of Montfaucon after a disappointing advance the previous day. The 314th never produced an official history, but Arthur Joel, a lieutenant in the 2nd Battalion, published a memoir that describes many of the regiment’s adventures. He wrote of the assault:

With the buzz of tanks and aeroplane motors and the bursts of high explosive and shrapnel, the regiment started ahead in one of the most exciting fights of its history. It was an inspiring sight to see wave after wave of infantry following the advancing tanks, and the other troops in small groups coming behind and on the flanks; and to watch the shrapnel and high explosive shells bursting among the lines and over the heads of the khaki-clad files.

There is no reason to doubt the accuracy of Joel's stirring account; other descriptions verify it. The problem is that, through no fault of his, it conceals as much of the story as it describes. The key is in the phrase, "wave after wave of infantry following the advancing tanks." By this point in the war, the British and French had learned that this was not a proper use of *either* infantry *or* tanks. Infantry were to attack not in waves but in independent groups as small as a platoon or a squad, probing for weak spots and bypassing strong points, which were left to the supporting units to eliminate. Riflemen and engineers were to go ahead of the armor in order to identify strong points, destroy mines, suppress anti-tank guns, and repel enemy infantry armed with grenades and satchel charges. Without close infantry support, the tanks, suffering from limited vision and frequent mechanical breakdowns, would quickly be overwhelmed or forced to withdraw.

This is, in fact, what often happened in the American offensive. Most of the tank units that fought with the AEF were French. Their commanders expected that the infantry would cooperate in the French style, screening the tanks from nearby artillery and fighting off enemy demolition men. When this didn't happen, the result was catastrophe. An American officer watched the tanks that were supporting the regiment to the left of the 314th as they attacked the peak of Montfaucon. The tanks were unaccompanied by infantry. The officer wrote:

Two tanks had hardly left the shelter of the woods when well directed shots fired at point-blank range by a battery of German seventy-sevens, reduced them to a pile of junk. The shells, striking the tanks squarely

in front, smashed the steel armor like an egg-shell and converted the interiors into a shambles of machinery, control apparatus and human flesh.

Had the attack been properly done, American infantry and artillery would have driven off the German gunners before the tanks ever left the wood.

Even when there was no German opposition, infantry's failure to support the tanks led to failure of the mission. A French armored battalion accompanied the 314th in its advance on Nantillois, a town about two miles beyond Montfaucon. Its commander wrote in his report:

The French 343d tank co. advanced . . . ahead of the infantry, reached the B. de Beuge where it destroyed many machine guns, then passed through and captured Nantillois. Passing through Nantillois, it met no resistance from the enemy. The infantry remained 1500 m behind the position reached and neutralized by the tanks. . . . Had the infantry followed the tanks and occupied the captured positions, they could have advanced 3 km on a 2.5 km front.

Without infantry, the tanks were forced to withdraw. The Germans quickly reinforced their abandoned position and Nantillois was not occupied until noon of the next day. Episodes of this kind were repeated in many places across the battlefield, and many lives were lost needlessly.

Joel's account of tanks leading the waves of infantry unwittingly betrays the ignorance of the American troops regarding tank warfare.

Cooperation between infantry and armor was a difficult art requiring many hours of training and practice. But no American divisions had trained with tanks before the Meuse-Argonne campaign. Most soldiers had never seen one, except in photos. The panoramic view that Lieutenant Joel described was an accurate picture. *He* remembered it as a glorious spectacle. With historical perspective, *we* recognize it as a tragic mistake.

Now let us raise our sights to consider as a whole the American contribution to victory. For many years, Americans subscribed to the view of General John J. Pershing, who told his troops after the war: "It is not too much to say . . . that America won the war, or at least that if it had not been for America the war would have been lost." America won, he insisted, by refusing to adopt the conventions of static warfare, by getting the troops – including those of the French and British -- out of their trenches, and by hurling the enemy backward into open country. Only a few months ago *Time Magazine*, in a special edition on World War I, could write of General Pershing that he “. . . led his inexperienced Army to a war none of the original participants knew how to win. Black Jack showed them how. And for that, this American hero deserves special mention, and a place in our memories."

The historian's job is to investigate the facts behind such statements, and here one immediately finds problems. It is true that as the Americans arrived in France, the three-year stalemate on the Western Front began to break up and mobile operations became more common. The reason was that the British, French, and German armies had all evolved their own versions of what is now called combined-arms operations. With variations from country

to country, these all included small-unit “infiltration” tactics using a variety of infantry weapons; sophisticated artillery firing schedules; and above all, integration of infantry, artillery, airplanes, and (in the case of the Allies) tanks into a mutually supporting assault force. Combined with rigorous training and meticulous rehearsals, such forces could with a fair degree of certainty breach the enemy line.

General Pershing acknowledged none of this. He believed that the European powers—and especially his own allies--were stuck in a defensive, trench-bound, no-win mentality. It would be up to the Americans to introduce a war of movement that would stress "individual and group initiative, resourcefulness and tactical judgment." His key training objective was expertise in the rifle and bayonet. An April, 1918 training program issued by his headquarters said, "The rifle and the bayonet are the principal weapons of the infantry soldier. He will be trained to a high degree of skill as a marksman both on the target range and in field firing. An aggressive spirit must be developed until the soldier feels himself, as a bayonet fighter, invincible in battle." Artillery, machine guns, and tanks would be useful, but only as an adjunct to the infantry. When in March 1918, the Germans attacked over the old Somme battlefield, destroying one British army and seriously damaging another, Pershing credited their success not to their infiltration methods or to their combined arms tactics, which were the real reasons, but to what he considered their superior use of infantry armed with rifles.

On September 5, a week ahead of the St. Mihiel offensive, Pershing distributed his Combat Instructions to the AEF: “Open warfare is marked by

scouts who precede the first wave, irregularity of formation, comparatively little regulation of space and time by the higher command, the greatest possible use of the infantry's own fire power to enable it to get forward, variable distances and intervals between units and individuals, use of every form of cover and accident of the ground during the advance, brief orders, and the greatest possible use of individual initiative by all troops engaged in the action." This is the order, he later wrote, that impelled the French and British to adopt his methods, which eventually won the war.

The problem with Pershing's account is that two months earlier General Ferdinand Foch, commander-in-chief of the Allied forces, had sent out his own order which called for constant maneuver; rapid execution and deep expansion of the attack; and, especially, immediate and long-distance exploitation of success. He wrote,

It is necessary to aim from the start at distant objectives, without limiting, in advance and deliberately, the chances of success. One can also envision the possibility of advancing beyond the initial objectives that one has set, and, as a result, giving to large units general marching orders and extended zones of action far beyond these objectives.

This is practically the definition of open warfare. When Pershing wrote his memoirs, he did not mention this earlier order of Foch. Instead he said, "Ultimately we had the satisfaction of hearing the French admit that we were right, both in emphasizing training for open warfare and insisting upon

proficiency in the use of the rifle." But Pershing's own research assistant, Lieutenant Carlisle V. Allan, could find no support for this statement.

Was Pershing wrong to insist that America won the war for the Allies? In terms purely of combat results, it is a big overstatement. In the last seven weeks of the war, the British and French armies captured fourteen times as much territory as did the AEF, using tactics they developed from years of experience and that they did not copy from the Americans. But it is beyond doubt that the presence of two million fresh, well-organized, highly motivated American troops at the front gave heart to the Allies when they had no other reason for hope, and proved to the Germans that they could never win. In that sense, Pershing was right: America won the war. And although his tactics were faulty, it was largely because of his command and organizational skills that it did so. He does deserve, in the words of the *Time Magazine* writer, "special mention and a place in our memories."

I have described two parallel ways of looking at the past, remembrance and history. They operate on the same information but often give different results. They serve different goals: history inquires, remembrance inspires. The great Russian psychologist Aleksandr Romanovitch Luria put a dividing wall between the two when he wrote,

. . . we must know the right time to forget as well as the right time to remember, and instinctively see when it is necessary to feel historically and when unhistorically. This is the point that the reader is asked to consider: that the unhistorical and the historical are equally necessary to the health of an individual, a community, and a system of culture.

No doubt Luria was right most of the time. The historical and the unhistorical accounts don't often coincide, they don't always give the same answer. But remarkably, in one aspect of the American soldiers' experience in World War I, they do. It has been popular for many decades to consider the War's veterans as a "Lost Generation," men who returned from battle so physically, mentally, and spiritually scarred that they lost all faith in abstract ideals such as courage and patriotism. A cynical materialism was all they had left. And certainly many soldiers were damaged for life. But three years ago the historian Edward Gutierrez published a book on the attitude of American soldiers to their war experience. He analyzed 30,000 questionnaires filled out by returning veterans in 1919. He found that the idea of the Lost Generation was

. . . a misnomer coined by Gertrude Stein and then aggrandized by Ernest Hemingway and his literary contemporaries. It continues to misguide our understanding of the conflict. The war shocked them, but it did not shatter them. Duty- and honor-bound, the doughboys were young and eager to fight on the Western front. . . . Even though the doughboys experienced the horrors of modern warfare, it ennobled them. They were honored to make the sacrifice.

In other words, they were proud of themselves just as we are proud of them. For the purpose that brings us here today, remembrance and history give the same answer.

I would like to conclude with a prayer for the members of the United States armed forces. This prayer is recited in hundreds of synagogues every Sabbath morning, after the weekly reading from the Torah. It sounds best in Hebrew, but I will read it in English.

God on high who dwells in might, the King who bestows peace, look down from your heavenly abode and bless the valiant soldiers of the United States Armed Forces who risk their lives to protect the wellbeing of all your creation. Benevolent God, be their shelter and stronghold, and let them not falter. Fill their hearts with courage to thwart the wicked schemes of enemies and to end the rule of evil. Protect them on land, in the air and in the sea, and defeat their adversaries. Guide them in peace, lead them toward peace, and return them safely and speedily to their families, as it is written: "God will shield you from all harm, He will safeguard your life. The Lord will guard your going and coming, now and forever." Grant us true peace in fulfillment of the prophecy: "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor shall they learn war anymore." May this be your will, and let us say, Amen.

Thank you.

© Gene E. Fax