

## **World War I - 100TH Anniversary** **by John McPartland, COL, USA, (RET)**

2018 Veterans Day Celebration, 11/11/18, Hayward, CA

TO ALL THE VETERANS PRESENT: THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE; AND WELCOME HOME!

GOOD MORNING AND WELCOME TO THE 2018 "VETERANS DAY" CELEBRATION AND THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE END OF THE 1ST WORLD WAR.  
How Did WW-I START?

Most of us don't remember (or never knew) all the details. But, perhaps, the better question is, "What does this celebration of Veterans Day, established so long ago, mean to us today: as Veterans, Families and Americans?"

In the early 1800s, Carl von Clausewitz, (the Prussian Major General and Military Strategist) wrote, "War is a continuation of politics by other means"; that was a rather prophetic statement; for 100 years later, in the early 1900s, Political Rivalries between nations had split Europe into two competing camps: Britain, France and Russia were allied Vs Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. International tensions were high, and the Continent was a virtual powder-keg. To borrow an infantry phrase, all of Europe was 'Locked, Cocked and Ready to Fire'. Anything could have started it, but the actual flashpoint that ignited the First World War occurred on June 28, 1914, when a Serbian youth (a member of a militant military group called the 'BLACK HAND' - we would call them terrorists today), assassinated Austria-Hungarian Arch-duke (and heir to the Throne) Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo, Bosnia.

War Is Declared

One month later, on July 28th, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia and Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II (and cousin to Franz) swore allegiance to Austria-Hungary. Russia immediately joined Serbia and before it was over, nearly every nation in Europe; plus, China, Thailand and Japan from Asia, and the United States and Canada from North America were in the fight. German forces quickly expanded the fight east to the Russian border and west into France, rolling over or forcing alliances with most of the smaller nations in its path.

For the first time in history, this was a war that encompassed the globe and was fought by sea, air and land, with weapons never before imagined: steel battleships and submarines by sea, planes and dirigibles by air, and machine guns, tanks, trench warfare and poison gases (chlorine, phosgene and mustard) by land.

German forces stalled on the Western Front in France and the first trenches were dug in early September 1914; less than 2 months after the war started in Serbia: on the opposite end of the European Continent.

### Trench Warfare

The trenches quickly became a series of two opposing lines, with a 'No Man's Land' in between, that extended 440 miles across France from the North Sea to the Swiss Border (for our comparison-that's the straight-line distance from here in Hayward to San Diego). And while the Americans joined the fight for only the last 18 months of the war, this long stalemate of Trench Warfare continued until the Armistice was signed: a total of 4 years and 2 months.

The combined resources from around the world were expended in this war; in the power and wealth of nations, material, political and military strategy, weapons technology, and especially: "soldiers' lives". Fighter pilot Manfred Von Richthofen, the "Red Baron" became Germany's symbol of courage, and Medal of Honor recipient, Sargent Alvin York, became ours. As West and East Campaigns continued, battles were won and lost; trench lines were overrun and retaken. And despite the fierceness of battles (on both sides), the stalemate remained for over 4 years; a war of attrition-of expended lives; UNTIL the deciding factor emerged.

### Spanish Influenza Plays A Big Role In Ending The War

There were no flu vaccines during WW-I and when the Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918 struck with a vengeance; it literally brought the entire world to its knees in a matter of months; 1/3 of the earth population was infected and incapacitated; and of those, 10% died. The entire world stopped functioning on a routine basis and mostly tried to survive while caring for the sick and dying. And on the War Fronts, supplies dwindled, soldiers on both sides were sick and exhausted with only Battlefield Medical Support. And because of this, the illness death rates of soldiers on the Fronts approached 50%.

### Germany Surrenders

And the "LAST MAN STANDING" was NOT Germany. In late 1918, the German Army and Navy mutinied; Kaiser Wilhelm was forced to resign, and the next day the German Government sued for peace.

And so, on this date in 1918, on a rail car in a remote forested area, 37 miles north of Paris, the 1st World War Armistice was signed at 5:00 AM, and became effective 6 hours later, at 11AM; The 11th hour ... of the 11th day ... of the 11th month ... 100 years ago today.

At 11:00 o'clock, in the trenches on the Western Front, the Allies watched as the German soldiers got out of their trenches, briefly stood on the parapets of their fortifications facing the Allies, bowed politely, and then turned .... and simply walked away.... In Paris, the citizens celebrated by dancing in the streets and drinking Wine; while in the Allied Trenches, the battle-weary American Soldiers celebrated by passing out and sharing the only thing they had to celebrate with: 1 cookie per soldier.

Germany surrendered unconditionally and was required to release all POWs, return all captured lands and property, surrender all war materials and agree to pay reparations..... It was little noticed in the United States eight years ago, when Germany finally paid the last of their WW-I reparation debt in 2010 (92 years after the war).

Overall losses: From: Both Fronts, Both Sides, Military and Civilian, Combat Casualties and Diseases, it is estimated that 40 million perished. Question: "How can we begin to comprehend the enormity of that massive number of lives lost?" ... Well, that's slightly greater than the total population of the entire state of CA today; and we are the most populous state in our nation.

American Losses: For the relatively short 18 months we fought, losses were over 116K Americans dead, of which more than half died from the Spanish Flu. But again, the same question: "How can we, you and I, understand, and internalize, what that many American casualties means?" .... Well, the population of Hayward today is just about 150K. So, the number of American lives lost in WW-I is more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  the population of this city.

## **Armistice Day Declared in 1918**

The day after the Armistice was signed, Nov 12, 1918, Britain declared Nov 11th to be "Armistice Day" to commemorate the end of "The Great War".

## **Armistice Day Renamed To Veterans Day In 1938**

The US followed suit to call Nov 11th, 'Armistice Day', but we changed it to be "Veterans Day" in 1938 when we made it a National Holiday; to commemorate not only the WW-I Armistice, but also to recognize and honor the service of the men & women who fought so bravely and sacrificed so much to win that war. It is doubtful that, in 1938, the authors of the change (from Armistice Day to Veterans Day) ever considered it would have to apply to the sacrifices of future men and women in wars yet to come.

## **Congress Approves "Tomb of the Unknown Soldier"**

Three years after the war, in 1921, Congress approved the "Tomb of the Unknown Soldier" and had the remains of an unknown American WW-I soldier returned from France to be laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery. And since 1937, the 3rd Army Regiment, officially titled the "Old Guard" (because it is the oldest Army Regiment in the US), has been "Standing Guard", 24 hrs. a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, over the Tomb. When Hurricane Sandy devastated the eastern seaboard in 2012, the Old Guard was advised to "Stand Down" for their own safety: The Old Guard refused to abandon their post. The "Tomb of the Unknown Soldier" was originally dedicated as a memorial to WW-I and its casualties; however, its meaning has evolved and grown as the remains of unknown service members killed in action from WW-II, Korea and Vietnam Nam have been added to the Tomb. And so now, for us as veterans, our families, and Americans; collectively; individually and personally; we all have ownership in this memorial.

If and when you visit the Tomb, I'd advise trying to do so during the changing of the guard ceremony, or "Guard Mount", as it is called. Guard Posts last 20 minutes to 2 hours, depending on the time of day and weather conditions; the schedule can be checked ahead of time.

To visit the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is an experience like no other. At first glance, you can see only a single "Old Guard" sentry, marching in slow motion, and perhaps you will also be distracted by the conversations of other visitors; but if you try, it's possible to block out all the distractions, absorb the history and enormity of the event, and to simultaneously experience the emotions of: reverence, sorrow, beauty, honor and pride of ownership in what is occurring before your eyes. Ownership as Americans, because this is the investment we have made to keep our nation safe; ownership as veterans, because a piece of our soul belongs here.

All the WW-I survivors are gone now, and of WW-II's 16 million service members, only a little over 500K are still with us; and those remaining survivors are in their late 80s and older.... Korean vets are in their late 70 and older and Viet Nam vets are in their late 60s and older.... Nearly all these veterans are retired now and may not have the resources to visit Washington DC to see the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier; or any other memorials or symbol of our nation's history and government, for that matter.

## The “Honor Flight Network”

The Honor Flight Network is a non-profit organization, set up to honor these senior veterans, by enabling them to fly to our Nation’s Capital, at no cost, feed and house them, and provide transportation for them to visit the memorials of WW-II, Korea, Viet Nam and more. And of course, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. As you can understand, priority goes to WW-II vets.

In years to come, when the current vets of the ongoing “War on Terrorism” are in their senior years, I can only hope there will be a memorial to commemorate their service and sacrifice, and a similar opportunity be provided for them to visit it.

My talk today is not an advertisement for Honor Flights, but if anyone is interested, please see me after today’s Veterans Day event and I’ll give you the contact information I have.

While all these war memorials in our Nation’s Capital are physically beautiful structures to observe while driving by, for those of us, as war veterans and our families, they can all be a much more personal and moving to experience.

While I have not taken an “Honor Flight”, I have visited these memorials and, when I visit the Viet Nam Wall, I find it to be an experience of: remembrance and re-bonding as I enter; of perspective, brotherhood and humility while there, and an almost tactile sensation of cleansing and healing as I depart. And while I have visited the other memorials, I cannot make that same personal connection; but I have been able to witness other vets, of other eras, experiencing pretty much the same thing I do.

For there is a common connection of experiences, understanding and often unspoken communication between veterans that transcends service branches and even wars themselves. It’s a connection that can never be fully explained and must be experienced to be understood.

Shakespeare came close to expressing this connection in “Henry V” when his character said, and I intentionally misquote because the version we used in Viet Nam is both more accurate and poignant: “We few; we lucky few; we band of brothers; for he who sheds his blood with me this day, shall be my brother tomorrow”.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for taking the time to be with us today on Veterans Day and the 100th anniversary of the WW-I Armistice. And to all the veterans present: again, “Thank you for your service, and Welcome Home.”

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