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Commemoration And Poppies: Cambridge, and Other American Battle Monuments Commission Cemeteries' Mission in Anniversary Years

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“The English language does not have the words to describe something as powerful as this¹”

Around the beginning of August 2014, the grassy moat around the Tower of London became a field of red ceramic poppies to commemorate the centenary of World War I. As Remembrance Day (Veterans Day, in the United States) on November 11 approached, millions travelled from all over the London area, the country, and indeed the world, to view 'Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red.' This display became so popular that the Mayor of London, as well as the leaders of the three major political parties and many average citizens, petitioned for the display to remain in place even after Remembrance Day. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, in the nation where its native son John McCrea, the surgeon from Toronto who wrote the famous World War I poem, "In Flanders Fields the poppies blow," immediately after the October 22, 2014 terrorist attack in Ottawa on Parliament, there was a push for the Royal Canadian Legion to start selling poppies earlier than normal for November 11 Remembrance Day (Yuen, 2014). While Remembrance Day is commemorated every year, 2014 took on heightened importance as the year was the 100th anniversary of the beginning of World War One. Clarke and Eastgate (2011) found in their research that the "sense of anniversary" (40) added "to the cultural value" of visits to commemorative sites. The recent list of these anniversaries and commemorations is lengthy. In June 2014, the 70th anniversary of D-Day was celebrated. More recently, related Victory in Europe and "VJ" days were commemorated. Eight hundred years ago, the foundation of English law, the Magna Carta was signed. In 2015, the Queen visited the Runnymede site and major exhibits were on display around Britain. In addition, Belgium saw huge numbers of tourists for the June 2015 reenactment and associated ceremonies on the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo. The Belgian city of Ieper (Ypres) sees an important contribution to its economy based on the daily "last post" ceremony at the Menin Gate which has seen even more attendees at the ceremony during the centenary. Visitors are often surprised at how many actually go to attend. Comments such as, "I was surprised by the number of people at the memorial. I arrived half an hour before the Last Call and there was a very large crowd already gathered at the memorial," often appear on TripAdvisor in relationship to the Last Post ceremony.

¹ Title of article in The Daily Telegraph, about the 888,246 ceramic poppies "planted" at the Tower of London, one poppy for each soldier killed (Grice 2014).

Research Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to provide a marketing perspective to the mission of battle monuments and commemorations, discussing the specific cultural policy of the American Battle Monuments Commission in this era of anniversaries as it expands its mission beyond “keeping the grass green and the headstones white.” This important American effort and the comparison to that of some other nations is placed in the context of an interdisciplinary literature base of education, tourism and marketing. It will also address how this heritage is kept alive and passed on to future generations in the United States. The research is an accumulation of interviews with eight Superintendents of American cemeteries in the UK, France, Belgium and Luxembourg and interactions with twenty-five US young teachers working with ABMC to prepare curriculum for the teaching of World War I.

Background and Literature Review

Relevant bodies of literature which form the background for this paper are in the field of roots/ancestral tourism, thanatourism (or “dark” tourism) and its specific subsegment of battlefield tourism, as well as K-12 curriculum development and teacher support. Superintendents of battlefield cemeteries often say that researching genealogy often leads a visitor to the cemeteries. Further exploration of the motivations behind travel to the final resting places of fallen is needed. Some already have emphasized the link between the popular field of genealogy and honoring those who have served in a nation’s conflicts. During the past November on UK television, Ancestry.com repeated the tag line “Discover your story by remembering theirs.” They showed a WWI soldier in uniform fighting what appears to be Post Traumatic Shock. In another advertisement, Ancestry told interested potential users, “This Remembrance Day get free access to all military records.”

The two authors of this paper (one a Marketing professor, one an Education professor) met through separate projects involving American Battle Monuments Commission. Since 1947, ABMC has served to oversee American memorials and cemeteries around the world. These projects focused specifically on the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery near Verdun, France. This World War I cemetery contains the most fallen of any American cemetery in Europe. In 2013, ABMC provided funding for a team of scholars and in-service K-12 educators to design open educational resources that aimed to leverage the physical, geographic, cultural, and historical view of the ABMC and surrounding areas in order to underscore the importance of WWI in US history curricula. This project endeavor included firsthand experience at the Meuse-Argonne site in France in July 2014.

Recognizing that “the English language does not have the words to describe something as powerful as this,” at least two scenarios are presented which provide in detail the moving experiences of the young teachers as they attempt to make the stories of the fallen come alive for a new generation. While the paper is written from an American point of view, commemorations of other nations, especially Australia with the 100th anniversary of Gallipoli in April 2015 is also discussed.

What is ABMC? The American Battle Monuments Commission, an agency of the executive branch of the United States government, was established in 1923. It maintains the U.S. cemeteries on foreign soil. Formally, the mission includes:

- Designing, constructing, operating and maintaining permanent American cemeteries in foreign countries.
- Establishing and maintaining U.S. military memorials, monuments and markers where American armed forces have served overseas since April 6, 1917, and within the United States when directed by public law.

- Controlling the design and construction of permanent U.S. military monuments and markers by other U.S. citizens and organizations, both public and private, and encouraging their maintenance (About Us, 2014).

The informal mission in the past, as discussed below, has been “keeping the grass green and the headstones white.”

Recently, ABMC has opened new visitor centers at Point-du-Hoc, France and Cambridge, England. In time for this, a new app was created. According to the company, NewCity, which created the ABMC app:

ABMC has been flying under the radar for some time. Their primary mission was keeping the memorials in pristine condition and welcoming visitors, particularly the friends and family of the fallen. While “Keep the grass green and the headstones white” has been an operating principle for a long time . . . the leadership of ABMC decided it was time to take on a more powerful storytelling role (American Battle Monuments Commission: *Stories of the Ultimate Sacrifice*, 2014).

One can see that ABMC is trying to keep up with the times “to take on a more powerful storytelling role.” This current paper emphasizes that role. The Cambridge site mentioned above is relevant as this paper is an expanded version of the presentation the authors gave at the Cambridge Conference on Business and Economics Research in July 2015. The paper was specifically submitted to this particular conference because of the nearby location of the Cambridge ABMC WWII cemetery.

ABMC faces numerous marketing challenges with attracting visitors. First, no commercial activity (e.g., gift shops) is allowed on the sites. This is in contrast to equally sacred sites of other nations, which do have gift shops. While numerous researchers (some discussed in the literature review of this paper) have found significant differences between various demographic and psychographic visitor groups, no formal visitor research is conducted on the sites by ABMC. One superintendent informed the author that Lisa Budreau (2010) has visited Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery and analyzed comments from visitor books from as far back as the 1930, but that appears to be some of the most comprehensive visitor analysis undertaken. Segmentation presents challenges as not only do staff find numerous profound and meaningful reasons for visitation, but they must deal with those who simply stop to use the toilets (a common complaint by superintendents) and even some who are so disrespectful that they bring a family out for an day-out picnic, leaning against and littering the grave sites.

While the ABMC Superintendents must manage all of the physical operations and often spend considerable time interacting with and helping the visitors at the sites, sometimes various groups’ interests join together in very rewarding experiences. Wishing to see where one’s grandfather fought with his division is representative of family history motivations often found in other studies and also represents the motivation of two sisters in their 80s who were with our group of teachers for a day. They had uncovered the World War I diary of the father (a dairy he kept secret from authorities during the war) and were making their way across the region of France where their father had fought. The entire group was quiet and emotions were high when, after a hike by war trenches, a hill was reached and the Superintendent of Meuse-Argonne cemetery said to the sisters, “this is the ridge your father helped capture.” One of the teachers was filming the two women to show his class. Thus, it appears that the older generation can keep the memory alive by involving future generations, certainly a successful extension of ABMC’s policy.

At the ABMC, there is a recent effort to “brand” (their words) more. But, how can staff implement overall branding to all locations and not let the “rock star” (i.e., Normandy, the

most well known and the most visited) control the branding for the entire organization? Of course, superintendents have their own public relations and marketing ideas. For example, one ex Air Force superintendent has reached out to a nearby U.S. Air Force base in Germany to coordinate spouses and family tours to his location and the Cambridge American Cemetery is on the city of Cambridge's hop-on-hop-off tourist bus tour, providing a bit more outreach to tourists. And, the Cambridge site has recently paid the city to have a city bus make regular stops in front of its location. It was an individual relationship between the staff at ABMC Meuse-Argonne in France and the authors of this paper which led to the implementation of cultural policy at headquarters discussed here.

“Anzac Day is Australia’s most important export” said one speaker in March 2015 at the Gallipoli 1915: A Century on conference in Canberra. As the April 25 (ANZAC Day) date was approaching, there were many specials on television and interviews with experts. A title of one show was “Why is Australia so obsessed with Gallipoli.” Obviously Gallipoli is a very important part of Australian heritage and tens of thousands were to make the journey to Turkey to commemorate the centenary. Comments from some of those Australians are included later in this paper.

Literature Review

Thanatourism (or “dark tourism” or “remembrance tourism”) is an increasing subsegment of the tourism industry (Dunkley, Morgan and Westwood, 2011). It can range from the macabre such “haunted” tours of large European cities (Krisjanous and Carruthers, 2013), to those who wish to pay respects to sites such as the September 11th Memorial in New York and war battlefields. While such sites and museums in general are being told that they must attract more young people, most tourists at many of these sites are often elderly. Qualitative or observation research is most often used to gather visitor data, but even that is problematic as venues limit research access because of the sensitive nature of many of these sites.

Thanatourism is defined as “travel undertaken to visit places associated with violent death. A subset of “[dark tourism](#)” (Define Thanatourism, nd). Dark tourism is a recognized academic field, according to “The Institute for Dark Tourism Research (iDTR), based at the University of Central Lancashire, England. According to “Where there is Darkness there is Light,” “If you have ever visited a Holocaust museum, taken a tour around former battlefields, or had an excursion to Ground Zero, then you've participated - perhaps unwittingly - in dark tourism. The term applies to the increasingly popular pursuit of travelling to sites where people have suffered or died in tragic or violent circumstances.”

The author says it best: “Of course, some dark tourism products may be perceived 'darker' than others, and this raises concerns about exploiting tragic history for entertainment or education. Questions are often raised about the justification of such dark sites, attractions and exhibitions.”

Battlefield tourism is a large subsegment of thanatourism and battlefield visitors are “possibly the most visible of all special interest thanatourists” (Dunkley et al., 2011: 865). Clarke and McAuley (2013) found that “sites or destinations associated with war represent the largest single category of tourist attractions in the world” (4), but that battlefield tourism might best be described “through the concepts of nationalism, genealogy and reflexive nostalgia” (14). Of course, there are many battlefields and cemeteries around the world which cover the span of centuries. One example is the Battle of Bannockburn in Scotland, where seven hundred years ago in 1314, the Scots defeated the English. Not coincidentally, cultural policy was evident in 2014, seven hundred years later, Scotland is celebrating a large marketing-laden Homecoming and also the September 18th vote on modern day independence from the UK (results were very close until the final tally with 45% of Scots voting yes for independence and 55% voting to remain in the United Kingdom). Obviously, those

responsible for policy take note of these centuries old battles and the sites at which they were fought.

Battlefield Tourism: Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia and Canada, 1919-1939

Lloyd (1998) details “the wave of tourists and pilgrims” who visited “the battlefields, cemeteries and memorials of the war . . . which shows how the phenomenon served to construct memory in Britain, as well as in Australia and Canada” (back cover page). *Bodies of War: World War I and the Politics of Commemoration in America, 1919-1933* (Budreau, 2010) concerns “the nationalizing of grief” (back cover page). Both Lloyd and Budreau are historians; others in many disciplines have written about battlefields, government policy towards, and the resulting tourism effects as well.

Winter (2011) discusses how many have made a clear distinction between “pilgrim” and “tourist” in battlefield tourism, but her research indicates that the two groups exist on a continuum and the lines between them are blurred. Still, the word “pilgrim” is used often to describe a person who visits battlefields.

Hyde and Harman (2011: 1343), when reporting on visits to the Gallipoli battlefields (an important World War I battle, especially meaningful to Australian and New Zealand citizens) discuss battlefield tourism as a pilgrimage, “a journey to a site that embodies the highly valued, the deeply meaningful, or a source of core identity for the traveller” “In an increasingly secular world, many non-religious people undertake journeys to sites of deep personal meaning.” These are secular pilgrimages and are an “under-researched phenomenon” (1343). For Australians and New Zealanders, a visit to Gallipoli is a “life event” and a “growing cultural expectation” (1345) that every Australian and New Zealander will visit Gallipoli “at least once in their lifetime.” Interest in achieving the life event can come and go over the generations and outside forces can also be influences. In the 1980s, the movie *Gallipoli* seemed to increase interest (just as *Saving Private Ryan* created increased interest in visiting the U.S. Normandy WWII cemetery). In addition, younger generations have greater access to these important sites than did their parents and grandparents. A large portion of the visitors to Gallipoli today are youth, which occasionally results in drunken parties at the site. Unfortunately this creates numerous management challenges for those trying to create policy and carry out the mission of remembrance. However, since the battlefields are important to the local economy, local officials might seem hesitant to crack down too heavily.

While battlefield tourism is included in the discussion of thanatourism, there are many deeper motivations for visiting such sites than simply dark tourism motives. Hyde and Harman found from past qualitative research that motivation for visits to Gallipoli included national pride, honoring the war dead, making a family pilgrimage, and the desire to visit the site of an important historical event. Many of the aforementioned youth have very different reasons for their visits; their motivation is often more leisure oriented and less commemorative.

The empirical research Hyde and Harman conducted found that of their sample of four hundred (mostly Australian and New Zealand, but some British) citizens, participants rated “to pay respects to people who fought for our country,” “because I am proud of my country,” “to experience the actual place where important events happened,” “to experience the real Anzac Day” and “what happened at Gallipoli represents the best values of my country and my countrymen” highly. The simple truth of “I wanted to see Turkey” was also a highly rated motivation.

Not surprisingly, there were some significant differences between visitor segments. The spiritual motives of Australians and New Zealanders were higher than any other national

group and nationalistic motives were significantly higher for Australians than for New Zealanders. "Seeking friendship" was a reason for young visitors, showing that segmentation does play an important role in managing these sites. One limitation of the Hyde and Harman research was that no Turkish visitors were interviewed. This is similar to limitations with many battlefield tourism projects; often there is limited input from those who live in the country where the sites are located.

Labeled "warfare tourism" by Dunkley, Morgan, and Westwood (2011), their article "Visiting the trenches: Exploring meanings and motivations in battlefield tourism" further explores the role that battlefield tourism has in thanatourism. The article explains that this form of tourism "turns conventional tourism on its head making it difficult to apply generic tourism motivational theories to its study" (p. 861) and points out the difficulty of created relevant cultural policy. The authors also state that the different categories of motivations for visits are not mutually exclusive and that some visit the sites "not so much to see what it was like, as to celebrate what they already knew" (Dunkley et al., quoting Seaton, 1999: 152). The research of Dunkley, Morgan, and Westwood is especially relevant to this paper, as their respondents visited the Somme and Ypres, not far from the World War I sites on which the current authors are focusing. The small qualitative sample found that moral obligation is an important motivation for reflection and commemoration. Visits also collectively mark the transmission of meaning from one generation to another. This transmission to the next generation is an important element of ABMC cultural policy.

Not all motives are collective ones. An obvious reason for visits has to do with personal family history (e.g., Clarke and McAuley, 2013) tying in to "roots," "diaspora," or "legacy" (McCain and Ray, 2003) tourism. Some wish to trace "a blood connection to WWI" (Dunkley et al., 2011: 863), as did one of the ABMC teachers mentioned below. Often, the modern day visitor goes as a representative for a deceased family member who cannot make the trip. A visit enables the traveler to observe first hand "the scale" (861) of the trench warfare. At least one of their respondents, who had a very specific interest in logistics, placed importance on the validation of what the locations (e.g., "no man's land") looked like, something one cannot achieve as well through simply reading about the war. The authors of this current paper found the same feeling of validation when one teacher, said that it was one thing to know how important capture of a certain hill was strategically, but standing on the hill and seeing the surrounding countryside makes the importance so much more understandable.

Clarke and Eastgate (2011) found that "religion meets commemoration" (31) during Australians' visits to the Western Front of World War I. For Australia, the war was a nation building experience. Therefore, national history can play a role in Australians' motivations. They state that battlefield tours are more than tourism experiences; they are secular pilgrimages. Their respondents indicated the tour to be the achievement of long-held personal goals which created their own heritage to add to their family history. While the themes of pilgrimage and family history are reiterated in others' research. Clarke and Eastgate are some of the few who point out that many of the preserved sites, while at authentic locations, have undergone "restoration, modernization and sanitization" (33) for visitors' easy consumption and safety. The visit becomes "an epiphany moment of emotion and culture built upon memory, history and learning" (34). In the current research reported in this paper, the authors build on the "learning" aspect as teachers who will both teach the history of World War I to America's youth and travel to important World War I sites to experience the authenticity (although the locations are restored and modernized for safety). Clarke and Eastgate emphasized the "state of education" (35) and how it contributes to "cultural capital" (35), which is learned – hence the important role of teachers.

Clarke and Eastgate also found that the rural setting is the “essence”(38) of the Western Front. This is relevant because the current research in that the Meuse-Argonne area of France – where the young teachers were working – is very rural. In contrast, the Normandy area where D-Day tours take place is said to be over commercialized (Lest We Forget, 2013). (One of the current authors found a “D-Day Paintball” location being promoted in close proximity to the numerous authentic hallowed locations in Normandy.) The Clarke and Eastgate respondents indicated that enjoyment is related to self-definition and goal attainment and the entire group agreed that being with others who shared similar interests and experiences was important. “The overriding outcome was to tell others about the Western Front experience” (40). The teachers at Meuse-Argonne in the present research also mentioned that a highlight was being with others who share their passion.

Clarke and McAuley (2013) conducted research during a reinterment of Australian World War I soldiers who fought at the Frommelles battle. In 2007 a burial pit of over five hundred human remains was discovered and a tour was established to commemorate the reburial. This particular site, especially because of the reinterment, is unique,. Clarke and McAuley refer to the sites important to the Australian narrative as “Australian sub-brands” (8), evoking the place branding that the marketing field can contribute.

The reinterment event was also described as a “hallmark event” (9) which means that one has to physically be present at these events to truly obtain the complete experience. In the current paper, the hallmark event was the field work by the young American teachers. Adding to the hallmark event for the Australians at Frommelles was the fact that it was a “remarkable ceremony for a generation far removed from the First World War era and actions” (11). Many nations are facing modern challenges of keeping the memory alive for today’s generations far removed from the First World War. Later in this paper, the authors report on young American teachers working to design school curriculum to keep the memory of World War I alive.

Clarke and McAuley (2013) found that that respondents indicated that interacting with the French people “was a delightful outcome” (13). One of the major scenarios describing the interaction with French villages and one of the young teachers in this paper also highlights the importance of this interaction.

In Their Own Words: Australian reactions to the Gallipoli centenary ceremony

A colleague of one of the authors remembers being in Istanbul once around ANZAC Day, when a waiter said, “We kill their grandfathers, and now they come to see us, can you believe?” Perhaps even Turkish tourism officials are a bit surprised on the importance of the Australian life pilgrimage to Gallipoli. Prior to Anzac Day, one of the authors was on a “Western Front” Australian Battlefield Tour in Belgian and France. Many of the fifteen or so Australians on the tour were to go on to the Gallipoli commemorations and agreed, once the ceremony was complete, to send some thoughts about the experience and the motivation for wanting to go:

Female, middle aged Australian, travelling with elderly mother to the centenary: *it was a wonderful experience mainly because I think we did travel in their footsteps even if it was only 12 hours in tough conditions, but without the prospect of loss of life. You just can’t imagine that in this beautiful part of the world 100 years ago, thousands of Australian, New Zealand, Turkish British et.al. troops died, away from their loved ones and homelands. I pay respect to them all. I was frozen solid, in pain, tired, a little scared, restless and uncomfortable. I’d carried about 10kgs of bags there for mum and I. I tried to keep mum warm but without much success, she was exhausted. I wanted to go home. I missed my husband and kids, my friends, my family. I hated it. And then I realized I was only there for a day.*

Female, senior citizen: *My trip to Gallipoli was truly a memorable experience and one which I feel so lucky to have experienced. I had not truly appreciated the steepness and the difficulties of the terrain until I saw and walked over part of it myself. . . .the silent arrival of all the warships was a very emotional moment for me: it brought home to me that I was witnessing a very similar view to what the Anzacs had done 100 years earlier. I choked up as the only sound to be heard was the lap, lap of the waves on the shore. Dawn was just about to break and all the crowd was quiet. it had to be experienced for the full effect to be felt - words just don't convey the emotive atmosphere.*

My other outstanding moment was walking up Artillery Road - just as the soldiers had done a century ago.

The security was very visible. I didn't feel intimidated but the Turkish authorities certainly were not taking any chances

It was an awe-inspiring experience. The ceremony included excerpts from letters written by soldiers; to hear of the experience in their own words made it real. I arrived back home to find the local library had prepared a special display which featured my grandfather - including a letter he had written home about his severe injuries. it was very gratifying to see his photo on display.

Experiencing the anniversary date and being at the location is important. While respondents realize that they can never truly experience what it was like (nor would they want to), the moving insight and emotional experiences will last a lifetime. Certainly battlefield agencies, managers of the sacred sites, and even local police are all affected by insights provided by those travelers who take to heart “lest we forget.”

Lest We Forget: Teaching the Next Generation

The teaching and learning landscape of any subject is complex and challenging to navigate. Today, teachers are expected to be “increasingly effective in enabling a diverse group of students to learn ever more complex material and to develop a wider range of skills” (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005, p. 2). A vital challenge facing teachers in 21st century classrooms is to design instruction and build pathways to academic growth that require more than the memorization of content and the retrieval of the given information for the next unit test. Rather, there is a need to engage students in “Authentic Intellectual Work” (Newman, King, & Carmichael, 2007) that is integrative (interdisciplinary), value-based, challenging, and active in order to facilitate higher level thinking, creativity, communicative competencies, interpretation, and in-depth understanding (See NCSS 2008). This approach to teaching and learning is founded upon a cognitive understanding of learning that shifts from seeing students as passive receivers of information toward recognizing learning as an active process in which learners are provided with room to actively process, connect, and relate information to their prior knowledge and situational, verbal, and social contexts. Within the field of humanities, a key learning outcome of such work is the development of not only deep content knowledge and 21st century literacy skills, but also the development of (1) a disposition to produce the best possible arguments for whatever stories we tell; (2) an acceptance that we may be obliged to tell different stories from the ones we would prefer to tell; (3) a recognition of the importance of according people in the past the same respect as we would want for ourselves.

A central concept in successfully meeting these ambitious goals is the acknowledgement of the importance of memory and commemoration as historical reference points. In partnership with ABMC, an assembled team of scholars, educators, and technicians explored the depth and impact of these concepts through an immersive research and curriculum development program at the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery near Verdun, France.

More than stale dates and facts, this ABMC landscape provided a nexus for these concepts within the power of *place*: the place where battles were fought, the place where soldiers sacrificed their lives, and later, the place of pilgrimage and remembrance.

How we remember our past is reinforced by monuments, gravestones, landscapes, and commemorative ceremonies – and eventually by curricula, textbooks, and the daily choices of schools and teachers on what should and can be taught. All of this is influenced by the cultural policy of a nation and its institutions. As such, the ABMCs mission helps create our public memory of WWI, especially the ultimate sacrifice paid by so many of our soldiers. Our work with educators in a “first among equals” approach focused on a select memorials, burial sites, individuals, and battles to study in order to disseminate World War I history to the next generation.

Within this initiative, two specific research projects identified and focused on the key themes of memory with particular poignancy and meaning. Several key individual projects will be discussed in detail in the article and how these efforts highlight the ABMC cultural policy of “keeping the memory alive.”

Ralph Weiler, Remembered

On October 8, 1918, Ralph Wiler died in a narrow clearing in the woods outside of Chatel-Chéhéry, France. Thanks to ABMC and its relationship with some young educators, on July 20, 2014, Ralph Weiler was brought back to life.

While this scenario might seem the introduction to a Stephen King novel, Ralph Weiler did indeed come back to life in the hot summer July sun nearly 85 years after German machine gun fire rained down on his platoon, killing him along with six of his fellow American soldiers. This re-animation did not require science fiction. Instead, six months of deep research in the historical record gave Jared Morris the evidence he needed to correct a mistake and bring Sgt. Weiler back to the historical record.

When Morris, a sixth grade history teacher in Madison, Virginia and a scholar in the ABMC project, first approached the concept of “bringing the war back home” he identified several key approaches to teaching the past to younger students. For a topic that seems “a long time ago and a long way away,” one of the most effective instructional techniques is the connection of an individual narrative to a larger, iconic storyline. Students can better understand historical empathy and a sense of agency with an individual, particularly one who is relatively young, than they can with large numbers of people or decisions by world leaders.

Morris identified a young soldier from his hometown in Pennsylvania and began the exhaustive process of researching his background, his life, and his journey from New Hanover to the muddy fields of the Meuse-Argonne. Ralph Weiler was not unlike Jared Morris: he came from a large, close family; he valued the community and his loyalty to that community; he led life facing forward. Morris re-assembled Weiler’s life with a series of curated primary sources from digital databases hosted by ABMC, the National Archives, and Library of Congress. The real narrative of Weiler’s life came to focus by artifacts, documents, and source material found in the suite of archives hosted by Ancestry.com. In addition to family and personal documents, Newspapers.com and Fold3.com provided a wealth of puzzle pieces that allowed Morris to structure a narrative from draft to deployment to arrival in Europe.

If Morris’s research had ended there, the subsequent teaching materials that he developed would have been invaluable. Focusing on the Great War through the eyes of an individual soldier provides a first-person steward to a series of events that boggle the mind. By tracing the moments of humanity and sacrifice, Weiler himself is able to walk us through the inevitable march towards modern warfare.

This research went a step farther by bringing Pvt. Weiler back to life. Morris describes his work in terms of personal connection:

“I came across an article talking about an “unsung hero” in the mix of Sgt. York’s heroics. The article mentioned in the PS that Weiler’s name was misspelled in the database of ABMC. I accessed Weiler through Ancestry.com and began to research Weiler and his family members. The Census of 1900, Census of 1910, Weiler and his brother’s draft cards, and Weiler’s WWII registration card as well.

“From there, I was able to paint a picture of the Weiler family and began to create a historical fiction account of Ralph and his family’s journey, which I will be put into a short film. After arriving in France, I was so attached to this one soldier that I anticipated with anxiety and excitement the moment I would finally be able to see Pvt. Weiler’s grave and pay my respects. I noticed at once that it was spelled “W I L E R.” After notifying Superintendent Bedford, he gave me primary documents from the time period to prove the error. Once proved, the wheels moved swiftly and the stone was cut and changed in 48 hours. The day after a man from Australia came to visit a few graves, Weiler’s being one of them. He was interviewed and noticed that the stone was changed. Out of 14,000 stones, this man came to visit Pvt. Weiler’s, and the impact of the changed stone was immediate.”

For professional historians, memory “explores not only official representations of the past in public monuments and commemorations but also the role of oral history and personal narratives, the influence of the new media in shaping historical consciousness, and the renewed relevance of history writing for emerging nations and social conflicts” (Project Muse²).

Public memory is represented by a series of choices, usually intentional, that value certain collections and the corresponding narrative. Statues and markers, holidays and rituals, all serve as tangible reminders of what we have chosen to remember.

Curriculum is another representative of this collective memory; that is, our vetted and legislated educational framework includes those facts and stories that we feel is the most valuable. Teachers make the decision every day to delve deeply into topics, discussions, and learning; or to gloss past facts and connections.

In this case, memory was restored of an American soldier who died and was buried thousands of miles from home and family, invisible in the historical record until a freshly carved stone stood above his marker. Pvt. Weiler’s revival serves as a powerful symbol for the fluid memory of a cemetery.

“Madame, can you spare a potato?”

Home has many connotations, some of which include familiarity, safety, family, stability, and permanence. Five members of our research team stood in the garden of an elderly French farmer as he recounted the severity of war on his village. Even as a very young boy, he was keenly aware of the loss of familiarity and safety. Perhaps equal measures of memory and the recitation of others’ stories, he described how every single building in the town was leveled by the advancing German war machines – and with them any illusion of stability or permanence.

²Project Muse is leading provider of digital humanities and social science content for the scholarly community hosted by Johns Hopkins University.

Katie Gullede is a sixth grade social studies teacher at Cary Academy in Cary, North Carolina. Her instructional goals were similar to Jared Morris: she wanted to find a first person narrative that could capture the journey of a local boy from North Carolina to the Meuse-Argonne. In this case, she wanted to learn more about the experiences of Pvt. XXX, who also happened to be Katie's great-grandfather.

Military service is nothing new to the Gullede family, and their sacrifice is nonetheless because most of them survived to return to their homes. This environment allowed for the sharing of stories and the creation of family memory, which oftentimes has little to do with a memorization of facts and events and more to do with a reflective nature of cataloging grief, relief, and awe. Suzanne Gullede remembers her grandfather talking about his experience in World War I in only one way – through the politely deflective story that the only way he survived the Meuse-Argonne campaign was to learn a single French phrase: “*Madame, pouvez-vous épargner une pomme de terre?*” This story allowed him to re-integrate into his family and embrace his home without digging through the deep trenches of his experience. A funny, poignant reminder that he returned home because of luck, the kindness of strangers, and not a few potatoes for dinner.

Katie's research tracked her ancestor's path across the Atlantic and to the contested landscape of the Great War. As she worked across the same French terrain, we discussed the concept of home and its role in surviving the brutality of war. Home was a rabbit's foot – something to rub and squeeze when looking for motivation to survive the day. Home was the open field on the side of a road somewhere in France, your brothers-by-draft eating and sleeping with you. Home was the place you protected, under-armed Frenchmen against metal opponents. Home is the place you remain decades later, still tilling the same ground to separate the unexploded ordinance from the onions and beets.

We stood in the farmer's home and listened to the translated stories of post-war village life. His evidence was the dozens of shoeboxes overflowing with shell casings and war detritus. Afterwards, Katie shared the story of her grandfather, and she repeated the same phrase that had echoed through her family history and home for several generations: “*Monsieur, pouvez-vous épargner une pomme de terre?*” Without missing a beat, he turned over the ground and dug up a small white potato. He handed it to Katie with earnest kindness, probably much as his town's ancestors had done for her great-grandfather. He explained that the French are still grateful and indebted to the Americans for coming to protect their home.

Pvt. XXX returned to North Carolina and put into motion a family history that ultimately led to Katie receiving a potato on the same ground nearly 100 years later. She returned to Raleigh with that potato and shared the story with her family over dinner, each plate garnished with a slice of that potato.

Conclusions

What better time to update technology and sponsor curriculum development, which aid in keeping the memory of the fallen alive, than in this era of anniversaries? The cultural policy of a large governmental institution such as American Battle Monuments Commission, with its emphasis on modern day interpretation and education for the next generation, can have very individualistic emotional impact, as exemplified by the teachers' experiences reported here. And an ambassador for ABMC cultural policy diligently recorded each teacher's individual experiences, one wonders, as with our ancestors, if “the English language does not have the words to describe something as powerful as this.” The Australians who travelled so far to attend the Gallipoli centenary indicated that the best way to understand is to “be there,” see the terrain, walk in the footsteps of their ancestors.

Certainly those whose mission it is to keep memory alive are thankful that these passionate young teachers are finding a few words, images, and experiences to describe “something as powerful as this.”

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