

## Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery (WWI) by Jeffrey Aarnio, Assistant Sup.

The Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery is located about 26 miles northwest of Verdun in the Meuse Department of the Lorraine Region. Meuse-Argonne AC is the largest military cemetery in Europe with 14,246 burials (as many as 28,000 burials at the end of 1918). It is fitting that this cemetery is located in the heart of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive of 26 September through 11 November 1918, which remains America's largest military offensive to date with over 1,200,000 soldiers who took part in this continuous battle over a 47-day period. To put this into perspective, there are currently around 160,000 U.S. military personnel in the entire country of Iraq. In the early morning hours of 26 September on the jump-off line, there were nine American divisions with six divisions in reserve. An American division in WWI consisted of 28,000 men as opposed to a WWII division of 18,000 men. (There were only five U.S. assault divisions in Normandy on 6 June 1944) The land between the towns of Romagnous-Montfaucon and Cunel, where the cemetery is located, was liberated on 14 October 1918 by the 32nd and 5th Infantry Divisions and was immediately used as a burial site. By 31 October, the American First Army had finally breached the last defensive trench line of the series of Hindenberg lines, not even five kilometers north of Romagne and suffered over 27,000

casualties. In the next 11 days, the First Army pushed north another 37 km to reach the edge of Sedan before the Armistice took effect on 11 November. While it is impossible to truly put into perspective the number of Americans and the difficulty of fighting in this colossal offensive, the map on the next page reveals how many Medals of Honor were awarded over this month and a half period. In all, a total of 119 Medals of Honor were awarded for the First World War. "Double" Medals of Honor awarded to marines by the Navy and Army for the same action - only count as one award. Out of the 119 total Medals of Honor for World War One, 53 of which were awarded for actions in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive (45%). If one adds the eight Medals of Honor earned in the Champagne Offensive in the area between the Argonne Forest and Blanc Mont (Sommepey - where the U.S. Federal Monument is located), then this brings the total to 61 Medals of Honor (51%). This latter tally is logical in that this area was known as the Meuse-Argonne (Champagne) Offensive and is in the area of responsibility of the Meuse-Argonne AC. There may very well not be another battlefield where so many Medals of Honor were awarded (post Civil War) than the horrendous battle that took place between the east bank of the Meuse river and the Argonne forest in the fall of 1918.

Those of you who have visited the cemetery or know the history may think of the Lost Battalion (elements of the 77th ID who were isolated in their advance when the flank units did not keep pace, eventually becoming surrounded by Germans for five days), or Sergeant York's heroic exploits (killing 15 enemy and taking 132 prisoners, portrayed later in a classic film with Gary Cooper), or the numerous officers who would later go on to greater fame in WWII such as Captain Harry Truman, Colonel George Marshall, Jr., Colonel Bill Donovan, Colonel Douglas MacArthur, and Lt. Col. George Patton, Jr. (all of whom fought in the Meuse-Argonne campaign). Of the nine Medal of Honor recipients buried at MAAC, Luke Air Force Base is named after Lt. Frank Luke and the National Guard training facility Camp Roberts in Central California is named after Corporal Harold Roberts. Corporal Freddie Stowers received the Medal of Honor in April 1991 after a Presidential committee was ordered to re-examine whether discrimination played a role in military awards. In fact, Corporal Stowers was the only black soldier to have been nominated for the Medal of Honor during the war. Also buried in the cemetery is the only Jewish soldier to receive the Medal of Honor during the war; the recipient was Sergeant William Sawelson.



**Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery  
Romagne-sous-Montfaucon, France**

Looking now at the lesser known history behind the Meuse-Argonne AC, it is fitting to examine the soldier that was selected among the 1,237 unknowns from the Great War to represent the national unknown soldier. This decision followed the British and French ceremonial burials of an unknown at Buckingham Palace and the Arc de Triomphe respectively. On 22 October 1921, one unknown from four American military cemeteries (Aisne-Marne, Meuse-Argonne, Somme and St. Mihiel cemeteries) was selected from among the unknowns “which represented the remains of soldiers of which there was absolutely not the slightest indication as to name, rank, organization or date of death.”(from Quartermaster report that can be read at: <http://www.qmfoundation.com/soldierunknown.htm>) The four unknowns were disinterred and brought to the town hall in Châlons-sur-Marne (today Châlons-en-Champagne) where they were given full military honors. One of the pall bearers, Sergeant Younger - a decorated infantryman - was asked to place a white rose on one of the caskets in the town hall. This selected unknown was then shipped to the United States aboard the American naval vessel, the Olympia. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier with the selected unknown remains (he was officially awarded the Medal of Honor, the Distinguished Service Cross and the highest military awards by several allied nations) was officially inaugurated on 11 November 1921, three years after the end of the war. The three remaining unknowns were brought to the Meuse-Argonne AC and interred in Plot G, Row 1, Grave numbers 1, 2, and 3 (also from Quartermaster report).



**Tomb of the Unknown Soldier,  
Arlington National Cemetery**

According to the ABMC book, “American Armies and Battlefields in Europe”, 1937 Edition, the American Air Service of the American Expeditionary Forces had a total strength of 78,495 men by November 1918, of which a total of 6,811 were balloonists. There were 23 balloon companies that actually served at the front, mostly for observation pur-

poses. The only recorded combat death of a balloonist took place when “Lt. Cleo J. Ross (8th Balloon Company) . . . and Lt. Herbert Hudnut were aloft and attacked by a Fokker D. VII, the balloon burst into flames. Lt. Ross made sure that his observer got over the side safely. He went over the side and after his parachute deployed, burning fragments of the balloon fell on the parachute. Lt. Ross [fell] to his death from several thousand feet.” The Army Balloon School at Ross Field, Arcadia, California was so named after the death of Lt. Ross, who is buried at MAAC. (see <http://www.militarymuseum.org/BalloonSch.html>)

When one mentions the Code Talkers, most people immediately think of the Navajo marines who were instrumental in the Pacific theater during World War II. But the original Code Talkers were fourteen Choctaw soldiers of the 36th ID who first used their language to defeat German code breakers in the Meuse-Argonne (Champagne) Offensive of October 1918. This highly successful use of Native American languages was repeated and expanded in the Second World War to include Comanche and, as already mentioned, Navajo, to compliment the Choctaw soldiers (see [http://www.turtletrack.org/Issues00/CO06032000/CO\\_06032000\\_Codetalk.htm](http://www.turtletrack.org/Issues00/CO06032000/CO_06032000_Codetalk.htm)).



**Choctaw soldiers of the 36th ID**

In early October, we had the pleasure of welcoming to MAAC an American grandfather, father and son—direct descendents of a WWI aerial photographer who took many photos of the Meuse area around MAAC—after all three had read, “Echoes of Eagles: A Son’s Search for his Father and the Legacy of America’s First Fighter Pilots”, by Charles Woolley & Bill Crawford. They made the decision to make the trip to France and visit the WWI battlefields after being inspired by the book and the experience of the great-grandfather during the war. One of their desires was to get out to Chièvres and see Captain Hamilton Coolidge’s iso-

lated grave. Cpt. Coolidge, nephew of President Calvin Coolidge, and friend and former classmate at Groton and Harvard of Quentin Roosevelt, was killed on 27 October 1918 about 10 km west of the cemetery. His isolated grave is maintained by the people of Chièvres.

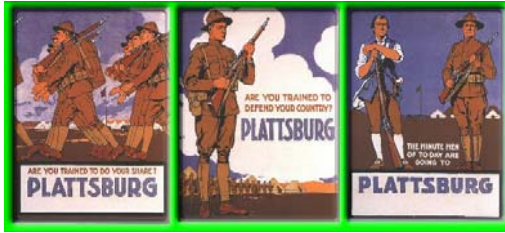


**Cpt. Hamilton Coolidge’s Headstone**

Sergeant Victor Chapman, Plot D, Row 1, Grave 33, is the only member of the Lafayette Escadrille to be interred in an American overseas military cemetery as a member of this French unit, also known as the Lafayette Flying Corps.\* This is a very unique and mysterious burial which still leaves us perplexed about how the decision was made to bury Sgt. Chapman in the cemetery. It is true that Victor Chapman was representative of the blue-blood idealists - he was the great-great-great grandson of John Jay, first U.S. Chief Justice - who volunteered to fight with the French and British before the official entry into war by the U.S. In fact, Chapman volunteered for the French by first entering the Third Marching Regiment of the First Foreign Regiment of the Foreign Legion before transferring to the Escadrille Américaine as one of its founding members (the name was changed soon after to Escadrille Lafayette following German protests of American neutrality in 1916). Chapman was killed flying a non-combat mission from his base at Behonne, near Bar-le-Duc, to deliver fresh oranges to another American pilot at the evacuation hospital at Vadelaincourt, near Verdun. Instead of following orders not to fly on a combat patrol, Chapman followed several Lafayette pilots to the east bank of the Meuse and was shot down near Douaumont, northeast of Verdun on 23 June 1916. (see “The Lafayette Flying Corps: The American Volunteers in the French Air Service in World War One”, by Dennis Gordon)



**Emblem of the Lafayette Escadrille**



The precursor to the Army's ROTC was the Plattsburg Movement, headed up by Gen. Leonard Wood and also supported by Theodore Roosevelt, which was the Citizen's Training Camps to train college students and businessmen with military tactics. The Plattsburg Barracks in upstate New York, where the movement began, was the site of officer training of 1,200 men who saw action in France in World War One, one third of which were from Harvard. One such soldier scholar was Captain Eddie Grant of the 307th Infantry Regiment, 77th ID. Not only was Eddie Grant a Harvard lawyer but he was also a professional baseball player. Recruited by the Philadelphia Nationals in 1907, Grant also played with Cincinnati Reds between 1911 and mid-season of 1913 when he was traded to the New York Giants; Grant appeared in the 1913

World Series with the Giants. During the off-season, Grant would practice law until the United States entered the war in April 1917. Following the tragic death of his wife, after only nine months of marriage, in 1911, Grant unselfishly volunteered for officer training at Plattsburg Barracks despite his law practice and 33 years of age (past the draft age). One year later, Grant reached France with the Liberty Division. He was sent with his Company H of the 307th Infantry Regiment to the Argonne Forest in September for the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Capt. Eddie Grant was killed on 9 October 1918 from wounds sustained during a rescue effort to reach Grant's friend and former Harvard classmate Major Whittlesey (Medal of Honor recipient as well as Plattsburg graduate) and his men of the "Lost Battalion". Captain Eddie Grant is buried in Plot A, Row 2, Grave 24. On Memorial Day in the spring of 1921, the New York Giants erected a memorial plaque in honor of its fallen third baseman, Eddie Grant, and later the plaque was placed behind the center field wall at the old Polo Grounds. Tragically, the plaque was never seen again fol-

lowing the move in 1957 when the Giants took up their new home in San Francisco. Recent attempts by the Great War Society chapter in San Francisco to have a new plaque erected in Eddie Grants' honor were for not; the current owners of the San Francisco Giants have refused such requests, stating that he belonged to the New York team. (see article, "The True Story of Baseball Hero Eddie Grant", Smithsonian, October 2004)

Another rare, and possibly unique, fact about the Meuse-Argonne AC is that there are three infants buried at the cemetery. From town hall records in Romagne, there was one still-born baby of an American chauffeur who worked for the cemetery in 1921; one child was the son of an American Army Captain stationed in Germany in 1922; and the third child was the son of the cemetery guardian in 1920. The children are buried in Plot F, Row 1, Graves 16, 29, and 31. It is not clear why these children were included in the military cemetery other than a parent either in the military or worked for the cemetery.



**Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery  
blanketed with snow**

\*Footnote: The only other burial of a member of the Lafayette Escadrille in an American overseas cemetery is Corporal Henry H.H. Woodward of the 94th Aero Squadron, Lafayette Escadrille. The distinction about Chapman is that he is the only Lafayette flyer to be buried and listed as a member of this flying unit and who did not belong to the AEF American Air Service. Corporal Woodward is buried at Suresnes American Cemetery, near Paris.