

PRESERVING AMERICA'S OVERSEAS WARTIME LEGACY

American war memorials in foreign countries tell fascinating stories. From tiny plaques honoring the death of a single soldier to elaborate edifices commemorating armies fighting their way through a region, these war memorials not only honor American soldiers abroad, but also serve as highly visible symbols of America's historic and continuing engagement overseas.

The spot where SGT Alvin C. York earned his Medal of Honor is marked with such a monument, as is the crossroads where then-2LT Audie Murphy earned his. The site of the Lost Battalion's final stand; the last bridge over the

**Photographs and Text
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The 1st Infantry Division monument overlooking Omaha Beach is one of 10 war memorials the Division beautifully maintains in Europe.

This decaying monument at Bourg, France, marks the grounds where then-LTC George S. Patton established the U.S. Army's first Armor school in 1918.



Rhine at Remagen, Germany; and the location of the U.S. Army's first Armor school in eastern France are some of the sites of the Army's wartime heritage marked by overseas war memorials. A replica of PVT John Steele and his parachute still hang from the church steeple at Sainte Mère Eglise, France, commemorating the town's liberation on the night of June 6, 1944. An enormous memorial and a museum in Bastogne, Belgium, mark the desperate fighting there during the bitter winter that followed.

The First Infantry Division has them. So does the Second Infantry Division, the Third, the Fourth and the Fifth—most U.S. Army divisions have war memorials honoring their accomplishments on foreign battlefields. In some cases, these memorials were built by the troops themselves with materials at hand when they were still in the area of operations. Sometimes the units took up payday collections to construct something more permanent or architecturally interesting. Often towns erected memorials in grateful appreciation of their liberators. Occasionally heartbroken family members wanted to remember their loved ones. More recently, veterans groups have raised money to erect memorials honoring their fallen comrades from years ago. As a result of all these nongovernmental initiatives, in addition to the official efforts of the U.S. government, there are

MAJ Lillian Pfluke, USA Ret., has extensive experience researching and preserving war memorials. A graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, she worked for the American Battle Monuments Commission in Paris for 10 years before founding American War Memorials Overseas.

more than 1,000 war memorials on foreign soil commemorating the wartime contributions of the U.S. Army.

In the vast majority of cases, however, the U.S. government has neither the resources nor the mission to care for these sites. The American Battle Monuments Commission maintains in splendid condition 24 overseas military cemeteries and 25 U.S.-constructed federal memorials. More than 1,000 other sites honoring Americans are considered "private" memorials, and thus are maintained entirely with private funding. While some monuments are beautifully maintained by U.S. associations or local towns, maintenance of many sites is haphazard and problematic.

After each of the World Wars, the next of kin of deceased soldiers was asked to choose what to do with the remains of their loved ones. They could repatriate the remains to the United States for private burial, or they could leave the remains in a U.S. Army cemetery overseas. Several hundred families chose a third option of burying their loved ones where they fell. Hundreds of other families, often recent immigrants to America, chose to repatriate the remains not to the United States, but to their homelands elsewhere in Europe. Thus while today we have just under 125,000 American war dead buried in overseas American military cemeteries maintained by the American Battle Monuments Commission, we also have hundreds of other sites worldwide of isolated graves of U.S. combat soldiers. While World War I Medal of Honor recipient SGT York is buried at home in Tennessee, the remains of fellow Medal of Honor recipient SGT James I. Mestrovitch rest in a churchyard in a small town in Montenegro, where he was born.

SGT Alvin C. York is honored in front of the town hall in Chatel Chehery, France. SGT York earned his Medal of Honor in the woods nearby.

When the families chose to leave their loved ones in isolated burial sites, they accepted all responsibility for gravesite maintenance. By law, their decision was considered permanent, and they specifically absolved the U.S. government—and hence the American Battle Monuments Commission—of any maintenance obligation. While a few families remain very connected to these sites, in most cases the memory and the connection have been lost over the years.

While working for the American Battle Monuments Commission in Paris, I discovered thousands of memorials honoring Americans, sites that the U.S. government does not maintain. Because no organization recorded the existence of these sites, most Americans don't know about them and, in many cases, the sites are poorly maintained. In other countries with significant numbers of war memorials, nonprofit foundations exist to care for private war memorials. I decided to create such an organization for America's overseas war memorials.

American War Memorials Overseas (AWMO) is a nonprofit corporation that documents, promotes and preserves non-government-supported war memorials honoring Americans outside of the United States to ensure that these monuments remain part of local communities forever. AWMO's mission includes:

- Recording the existence and location of non-government-supported war memorials honoring Americans overseas and making this information available to the public.
- Encouraging cultural tourism to visit these historical sites.
- Encouraging and facilitating local communities to fly the American flag over private war memorials honoring Americans.
- Monitoring the condition of these war memorials and encouraging their conservation.
- Advising those involved in war memorial projects and facilitating maintenance projects for sponsoring organizations.



- Working with communities and organizations to encourage local responsibility for war memorials and recognizing the need to conduct restoration work on these monuments as required.
- Building a greater understanding of war memorial heritage and raising awareness of the issues surrounding war memorial conservation.

The American War Memorials Overseas web site, uswarmemorials.org, maintains a searchable database to



Many isolated gravesites, such as this one in a churchyard in Cuperly, France, have been forgotten and are no longer maintained.

which memorials are continually added. Visitors can search for sites by location, unit, person or war. They can find pictures of the site, transcriptions of the exact text on the monument and even a link to a mapping service to precisely locate the site. There are resources to use in monument maintenance or in planning war memorial ceremonies. American War Memorials Overseas publishes an electronic quarterly newsletter that spotlights different memorials around the world.

AWMO relies on regional volunteers to monitor and report on the condition of war memorials as well as to work with others in their area to preserve war memorial sites. Regional volunteers generally live or travel extensively in an area overseas where U.S. forces fought. Valuable informa-

A parachute with an effigy of PVT John Steele hangs from the church steeple in Sainte Mère Eglise to commemorate the D-Day invasion and the town's liberation.

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tion about the existence of war memorials comes from a wide variety of sources, including traveling Americans, local researchers, historical publications and veterans organizations. AWMO gathers information from multiple sources to include the maximum amount of information about each site online.

American War Memorials Overseas is currently fundraising to launch two major programs. The first is an effort to send donated American flags to villages with U.S. commemorative sites that are not supported by their respective foreign governments. Often towns are unable to obtain flags and, even if they can, are unaware of the proper protocol for flying the American flag. AWMO will distribute U.S. flags and local-language instructions on how to fly them properly with the goal of having the Stars and Stripes flying over hundreds of sites around the world. The second AWMO initiative is to give grants to local organizations to fund maintenance and refurbishment projects at U.S. commemorative sites that don't otherwise receive any financial support.

A war memorial is certainly a remembrance of the past, but it is also a beacon for the future. It is a reminder for all of us to constantly nourish our ties to other countries and other peoples. It is a way of keeping memories alive—not to dwell on sadness and death, but to think about heroism, sacrifice and freedom. American War Memorials Overseas is proud to assist in preserving America's overseas wartime heritage. ★

