

Time to honor our fallen in Europe

By **BRETT HARRIMAN**
Stripes Travel reader

With Memorial Day almost upon us, it is fitting to reflect on those Americans who have made the ultimate sacrifice on foreign soil. I believe it is the duty of every American to pay homage, at least once, to those who have died to help preserve our liberty.

The fallen servicemen and women interred in American cemeteries in Europe came from all walks of life, from every state in the union. They died serving their country, most in the prime of their lives. Each death, represented by a white-marble cross or a Star of David, is a vivid reminder that freedom is not free.



Brett Harriman

The American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC, www.abmc.gov) oversees 24 cemeteries in Europe that are the final resting places of the American fallen of the two world wars. To say that the cemeteries are beautiful is a huge understatement. They are divine, majestic, immaculate, serene, awe-inspiring and educational.

In most cases they are located on or overlook the battlefield where Americans fell. But ABMC cemeteries are also intended for the living. "It is a reminder to all of us; there is no greater love than that of someone who is willing to lay down his life for somebody else," said 20-year Marine Corps veteran Michael W. Green, superintendent of Ardennes Cemetery in Belgium. "Our mission is to never forget what they did for us. It is the visitor who validates their sacrifice."

Many cemeteries are within reach of popular travel destinations such as Paris, Brussels and Florence. One is likely to be near a destination already on your travel itinerary. If not, make a detour. The cemeteries are open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily except Dec. 25 and Jan. 1. Space does not allow me to print the full histories of and directions to each cemetery. For those, see "Lest We Forget" at www.HarrimanTravelBooks.com.

Here is a sampling of the most-visited and the most powerfully moving cemeteries in Europe. I hope you find yourself at one of them on Memorial Day.

World War I

• **Suresnes American Cemetery:** 7 acres, 1,541 men and women rest here, many of whom died from sickness or battlefield injuries while admitted to the



Stripes file photo

A woman walks through the 50-acre Luxembourg American Cemetery. Gen. George S. Patton and 5,075 other members of the U.S. armed forces are buried in the cemetery established in 1944.

TRAVEL TALES

American military hospital in Paris. Among those buried are a pair of brothers, seven nurses (two were sisters), and 24 unknown soldiers from World War II. In 1919, President Woodrow Wilson dedicated the cemetery on Memorial Day.

Situated on the historically rich slopes of Mont Valérien, the memorial park affords an unforgettable view of Paris, punctuated by the Eiffel Tower. In earlier times, Mont Valérien, known as Mont Calvaire, was the site of a hermitage that regularly attracted religious pilgrimages. Part of the hermitage consisted of a guest house, which was often visited by Thomas Jefferson during his five-year ambassadorship to France (1785-89). In about 1813, Napoleon directed that a fort be built here.

During WWII, German troops occupied the fort and executed some 4,500 political prisoners and members of the Resistance. Commemorating the sacrifice of those who died under Nazi rule, the French erected a monument along the fort's south wall. Mont Valérien, hallowed ground for both France and America, is a must-visit for any tourist in Paris.

• **Oise-Aisne American Cemetery:** 36 acres, 6,012 graves, the second largest burial of U.S. military dead in Europe from World War I, most of whom died in the summer of 1918 while defending the German offensive aimed at capturing the French capital and effectively winning the war. Those buried here represent all of the then 48 states and the District of Columbia. One of the soldiers representing New York, Sgt. Joyce Kilmer (plot B, row 9, grave 15), a leading poet of his time, was killed by a German sniper on July 30, 1918, some 800 meters from where his headstone now rests. Back home, to

honor Kilmer's memory, a handful of schools, parks and squares bear his name.

• **Somme American Cemetery:** 14 acres, 1,844 rest here, most of whom fought and died with the U.S. 27th and 30th divisions, II Corps, during the first and second battles of the Somme (March to November 1918), which saw some of the bloodiest fighting of the war.

The advancement of armies in the Somme measured mere meters but cost thousands of lives. The American 107th Infantry Regiment, 27th Division, suffered 995 casualties on the first day alone of the Hindenburg offensive in the Somme, the country's single largest regimental loss of the war. By the end of the battles, the U.S. II Corps suffered an astounding 13,500 casualties. Its soldiers were awarded 19 Medals of Honor.

Today, the picturesque cemetery is set amid gently rolling farmland in northern France formerly comprising the German Hindenburg Line (multitiered trench fortifications).

Among the graves are those of three Medal of Honor recipients, as well as nurse Helen Fairchild from Pennsylvania (plot A, row 15, grave 13), who died as a result of lending her gas mask to a wounded soldier. The deaths of brothers James and Harmon Vedder (plot D, row 2, graves 2 & 3), inspired the creation of the American Gold Star Mothers.

World War II

• **Cambridge American Cemetery:** 30 acres in Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, England, 3,812 graves. Most of these fallen "Yanks" fought the air war over European skies, while some died during the invasions of North Africa and France. Additionally there are the names of 5,127

engraved on extensive wall tablets, whose remains were never recovered or identified.

Of these you'll find Alton G. Miller, famously Glenn Miller, the 1940s big-band leader. He was never found after his plane went down over the English Channel on his way to entertain the troops in France in December 1944.



Glenn Miller

Another famous name here is Joseph P. Kennedy Jr., handsome bomber pilot and the elder brother of President John F. Kennedy.

• **Normandy American Cemetery:** 172 acres, 9,387 rest here, most of whom died on Omaha and Utah Beaches and during the operations to liberate France. Of all the ABMC memorial parks, Normandy is the largest and by far the most visited, with approximately 1 million people paying their respects annually.

Framed by bristly pine trees, the cemetery is majestically perched above wind-swept Omaha Beach overlooking the English Channel. It was from this turbulent waterway more than 65 years ago that the greatest invasion force in the history of the world materialized, dubbed Operation Overlord and celebrated as D-Day.

Just two days after the Normandy landings, members of the Graves Registration Service began burying the dead on the terrain that is today Normandy Cemetery, thus establishing the first World War II burial ground on European soil.

Among the 9,387 interred here, three are Medal of Honor recipients, four are women, there are 33 sets of brothers who rest side by side, and in one case father and son, Col. Ollie Reed and

1st Lt. Ollie Reed Jr. (plot E, row 20, graves 19 & 20). Brig. Gen. Theodore Roosevelt Jr., Medal of Honor recipient and son of former president Theodore ("Teddy") Roosevelt, is buried next to his brother Quentin (plot D, row 28, grave 45). And the brothers who inspired the movie "Saving Private Ryan," Preston and Robert Niland, are also among the deceased (plot F, row 15, graves 11 & 12).

• **Netherlands American Cemetery:** 65 acres, 8,301 graves, representing 43 percent of original U.S. burials in the region, most of whom fought with the U.S. First and Ninth Armies as well as the 101st and 82nd airborne divisions for the liberation of the Netherlands and during combat operations into Nazi Germany. If you've seen the 1977 epic war film "A Bridge Too Far" (portraying the failed Operation Market Garden), you have a good understanding of the bitter fighting that took place here. Among the fallen is Medal of Honor recipient Pfc. Walter Wetzel from Michigan (plot N, row 18, grave 10), who threw himself on two enemy grenades during a German attack on his command post to save a roomful of his buddies. The tremendous sacrifice of the American family is doubled in the 40 instances in which brothers rest side by side. Landscaped in a rural setting near Germany, this thought-provoking memorial park is the first to be allocated for U.S. soldiers who died on German soil as well as the only American military cemetery in the Netherlands.

• **Luxembourg American Cemetery:** 50 acres, 5,076 are buried here, most of whom fought with Gen. George S. Patton's Third Army in the Ardennes (Battle of the Bulge) and eastward to the Rhine. Among these veterans, every state in the union is represented, two are Medal of Honor recipients, 22 sets of brothers rest side by side, and one burial is that of beautiful Army nurse 2nd Lt. Nancy Leo from Maryland (plot H, row 9, grave 71), who died in a jeep accident one month before her 24th birthday.

Between the flagpoles, Patton is buried at the head of his troops. Nancy Leo is not the only female presence at Luxembourg Cemetery. According to the book "The Pattons: A Personal History" by Robert H. Patton (the general's grandson), Patton's wife, Beatrice, wanted to be buried with her husband, but this was not allowed. So Mrs. Patton elected to be cremated, and the Pattons' children traveled to Luxembourg and scattered her ashes over the general's grave.



Gen. George S. Patton

Brett Harriman is a former tour guide for Germany and Austria with the U.S. Armed Forces Recreation Centers in Germany. He now lives in Nevada and is publishing a Germany and Austria guidebook on his website, www.HarrimanTravelBooks.com. This account is based on his research; find details on all American cemeteries in Europe on his website.