Memorial Day Speech by Dave Gathman
Bluff City Cemetery
Elgin, Ill.
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Remember when the traveling Vietnam Wall visited Elgin a few years ago? We were overwhelmed by its tablet after tablet of 58,318 names. Every one representing a young man or woman whose dreams ended in a far-off jungle in the 1960s and 1970s. Tragic.

If you've traveled to Belgium, though, you might have discovered that the British have a similar memorial in the city of Ypres -- Y_P_R_E_S -- called the Menin Gate. It contains name after name of more than 54,000 "Tommies" killed in World War I.

But there's a difference. Our Vietnam Wall lists every American killed in the entire Vietnam War, over 12 years. The Menin Gate, with just 4,000 fewer names, lists only British World War I soldiers who were classified as missing in action because they had been blown to bits or sank into the mud. And not even in all of Europe and Asia, but just those missing in one little corner of Belgium about 20 miles square.

For people in Western Europe, World War I is considered a horrendous waste, a disastrous misstep, a bloodbath worse than what happened in 1939-1945. The British Empire lost three times as many killed in World War I as in World War II, Italy four times as many, France seven times as many. We in America got off relatively cheaply, because we joined the war late and OUR soldiers -- who called themselves doughboys -- really were involved in heavy combat for just half a year. But we still ended with twice as many dead -- about 116,000 -- as we did in 12 years of Vietnam.

The war started in 1914, three years before America joined in. Germany and France believed that a few weeks of fighting would bring them cheap victory. Instead, it brought bloody deadlock as the huge armies dug 400 miles of opposing trench lines through France and Belgium known as the Western Front. All through 1915, 1916 and 1917 millions of men fought and died there without moving the Western Front more than a few miles.

When I was growing up in Elgin in the 1950s and 1960s, we played soldiers a lot. We watched movies like "Guadalcanal Diary" and read books like "30 Seconds Over Tokyo." Almost all of my friends had dads who had served in World War II or Korea. But when we would drive past that statue of a doughboy soldier on Villa Street, I realized that no one ever talked about World War I, except for air battles fought by the Red Baron and Eddie Rickenbacker and Snoopy the beagle. I went to Gail Borden library and started finding out what had happened between 1914 and 1918. And I could see parallels with my own generation's war, in Southeast Asia.

Like Vietnam in the 1960s, the deadlocked Western Front in 1915-1917 became an exercise in attrition and exhaustion where possession of land meant nothing. The only real "score" worth paying attention to was the number of dead boys carried off on each side and whether morale was holding up back home. In both Vietnam and in World War I, each side had lost so many

loved ones in past battles, they didn't dare compromise and say that the past martyrs had died for anything short of absolute victory. So each war ground on, creating even more martyrs and making a compromise peace ever more impossible.

In America, meanwhile, President Woodrow Wilson ran successfully for reelection in 1916 on the slogan "He kept us out of war." People like my great-grandparents, who still spoke German at home and at church, had little ambition to go overseas and fight the army of Kaiser Wilhelm. In Elgin at that time one-fourth of all the people in town either had been born in Germany or had both parents who had been born in Germany. Just east of Elgin, many kids attended one-room German-language schools in Schaumburg Township and Hanover Township, which had not been named after villages in jolly old England. Many other American families had come from Ireland and had no great yearning to go and risk their lives on behalf of the oppressing English.

But by 1917 the German government had come under the control of a brilliant workaholic general named Eric Ludendorff. You might recognize Ludendorff as the villain in last year's movie "Wonder Woman." In spring 1917 Ludendorff decided to try to win the war by having Germany's submarines, or U-boats, sink neutral American ships that were bringing ammunition and food to England and France. Germany also sent a message to Mexico, saying that "if you ally with us and invade the United States, we will support you getting back Texas and New Mexico and Arizona and California."

Even if they were named Schmidt, or O'Malley, or Gathman, Americans couldn't take that. On April 6, 1917 Congress declared war on Germany. Wilson changed his slogan from "he kept us out of war" to "we're fighting to make the world safe for democracy" and "this will be the war that ends all wars."

Today, May 28, is also the 100th anniversary of the first battle fought in Europe by an American army, the Battle of Cantigny. Remember that we had declared war in April 1917. It wasn't until the end of May the NEXT year that we fought our first battle. And even that wasn't really much of a battle -- a single infantry division, the Big Red One, conducting a one-day attack on a small wrecked village surrounded on three sides by French troops. Why did we take so long to be able to do that? Because up till May 28, 1918 our army had been pathetically weak. It had been outnumbered by such giant world super powers as Belgium and Romania and Bulgaria. So it took us a long time to train all these new draftees and get them equipment and move them to Europe.

Within a few days other divisions of doughboys were meeting the Germans in places called Belleau Wood and Chateau-Thierry, and even counterattacking them in the Second Battle of the Marne. But we didn't launch a really big offensive of our own, with over a million men, until September 1918, when the U.S. First Army Group under Gen. John "Blackjack" Pershing attacked in the Argonne Forest and the Meuse River Valley.

The Battle of the Meuse-Argonne lasted just six weeks. But it accounted for half of all our battle casualties. In fact, it was the bloodiest campaign ever fought by the U.S. Army. But it pushed the Germans back in a critical area. Combined with big British and French advances all along the

front that autumn using tanks and airplanes, it ended with the Germans agreeing to an armistice on Nov. 11.

When I became a reporter for The Courier-News in the 1970s, I vowed to interview as many local veterans of both world wars as I could. I learned that they came from an era when "my country, right or wrong" was not a sarcastic jab. It was gut instinct, hard-wired into every red-blooded American.

The first one from World War I that I interviewed was a true "character," full of what he described as spit and vinegar, except he didn't use the word "spit." He was a retired state cop named Howard Hoagland. Hoagland showed me the water-stained diary he kept as his ship crossed the Atlantic. It ended the night the ship was torpedoed and sunk by a German U-boat. Once Hoagland got to France, he and his buddies vowed to kill 56 "Huns," one for each of the men of his company who had been killed in the ship sinking. His unit advanced against the enemy in the Second Battle of the Marne but was ambushed by a German machine gun. A bullet hit him in the leg. Hoagland also showed me where mustard gas, which burned the skin as well as the lungs, got through a hole in his pants and left a scar on his leg.

Elgin even sent some women to war. Ruth Boeman was the manager of her father's silent-movie house, the Orpheum Theater, when her husband joined the Army and she joined the Navy. She spent the war doing clerical work in Chicago. When I interviewed her by phone in 1996, she had just turned 100 and was living in California.

A modern-day Bartlett woman, Mary Bavido, recently started researching the lives of all 55 Elginites who died in the war. One of the first she tracked down was the only woman on that list, Helen Bartlett. Mary Bavido discovered that Helen enlisted in the Navy in Chicago on Sept. 19, 1918. On Sept. 30 -- just 11 days later -- she died in a hospital in Washington, D.C.

What killed Helen Bartlett was a disease called Spanish influenza. Actually, that probably should have been called the Kansas influenza because it was first discovered in March 1918 at an Army base in western Kansas. Now, influenza is never pleasant. But it usually KILLS only babies, elderly people and those who are already weak and sickly. This Kansas flu of 1918 was just the opposite. It especially hit hard against healthy people in their teens and 20s, using their own good immune systems to inflame the inside of their lungs and drown them in their own phlegm. It was the perfect virus to spread through Army camps and Navy hospitals and overcrowded transport ships. And our Helen Bartlett was hardly unique. Of the 116,000 American service people who died, the flu killed almost exactly the same number of doughboys and sailors as the kaiser's shells, bullets and gas did.

In fact, the flu spread into the civilian population around the world and killed 20 to 40 million people. That included half a million in the U.S. and 70 in Elgin. It was one of the greatest disasters in history, though we hear hardly anything about it anymore.

Veterans Memorial Park contains a bronze plaque bearing the names of 41 dead Elgin Township service people. Mike Alft, the dean of Elgin historians, tracked down what happened to 38 of

these people. Just 15 had died from enemy fire. Seven had died from sickness -- probably the flu -- in France. The largest number -- 16 -- died from sickness before they had even left the States.

One of the last Elgin doughboys, a printer named Joe Bennett, never got overseas. But he may have taken an even bigger risk than combat because he volunteered to serve in the influenza ward of his Army base in Kentucky. Bennett told me, "They started piling up dead men like wood. They'd tie one of your dog tags around your foot and one around your wrist and just wrap you in a sheet. The other guys said, 'Joe, are you crazy to volunteer for that?' But I said, 'If I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die.' And you know, I never did catch that stuff."

On April 24, 1919, Joe Bennett was kicked out of the Army because of a hearing problem. On April 25th, 1919 he went into a recruiting office and signed himself back in. He didn't leave the Army for good until a year later.

Another casualty traced by Mary Bavido was Private George Gannon, who served in the First Division's artillery. He was probably fighting at Cantigny 100 years ago today. Gannon was reported missing in action and presumed dead on Oct. 5, during that terrible Meuse-Argonne battle. Maybe his body was blown to bits. But just maybe he became the Unknown Soldier whose tomb is honored every year in Washington.

Elgin men served in many different units. But we had a special tie to Company E of the 129th Infantry of the 33rd Division, because that had been Elgin's National Guard company. When the company was sent to France 133 of its men --more than half -- were from the Elgin and Dundee area. Their story is recounted in a book called "Hardtack and Bullets," by Corp. Henry J. Hines. Hines uses a lot of homespun humor as he tells about battles with lice and weeks without a bath and how rats' paws feel chilly when they walk across your face at night. But he's also frank and graphic as he describes how four Company E men from Elgin were killed and how he himself finally was laid low by inhaling mustard gas.

All four Elgin men -- Sgt. Leo Anderson, Corp. Jacob Swanson, Private Charles Virisco and Private Carl Kruse -- were killed by artillery fire in October 1918, in the Argonne Forest. In Kruse's pocket they found a letter from his little brother back in Elgin, remembering the fun they had enjoyed together and hoping he'd get home soon. Hines tells of finding only little pieces of one man and of another man being cut cleanly in half. Artillery fire was a particularly horrible danger because it must have felt so impersonal and so impossible to defend against. It could blast you into shreds or it could rain a shower of shrapnel bullets onto you from overhead or it could cave in your dugout and bury you alive. It was machine guns that stopped the attacks. But artillery shells caused 60 to 70 percent of all fatal casualties.

Company E's greatest hour came at a place called Whiz Bang Hill. That was named because of the sound that a certain size of German shells made when they came down on you -- whiz--BANG! (Trivia note -- the word "pipsqueak" comes from the sound made by a smaller kind of German shell.) The hero of Whiz Bang Hill was Sgt. Harry Petschow of Dundee, who refused to leave the shell-torn hell hole even though it was so rocky that no one could dig a proper trench or foxhole. Most of the men hid below in dugouts, but somebody had to stay on the surface to

warn everyone if the German infantry counterattacked. Sgt. Otto Voss was hit in the back by shrapnel but also stayed for awhile by Petschow's side.

After the war the survivors of Company E held reunions at the VFW Hall every Sept. 26, the date that the Battle of the Meuse-Argonne had begun in 1918. And in 1944, this bunch of middle-aged guys decided to form a Last Man's Club. They put a bottle of Ol' Grand Dad whisky in an 18-inch high wooden outhouse and said that whichever one was the last one left alive should open that bottle of whisky and drink a toast to the others. The Last Man's Club originally included 100-some guys. By the time I started following it closely, in 1990, three were still alive and we knew that little outhouse would be opened up pretty soon.

I was in the room on March 29, 1993 when the last man of that Last Man's Club took a little sip of that 49-year-old whiskey. It was Otto Voss, the sergeant who had been wounded on Whiz Bang Hill. Just a few weeks before that he had been lying alongside fellow Company E man Howard Carlson in the intensive care ward at Sherman Hospital after suffering a stroke. But Carlson had died and Voss had recovered, at least temporarily.

Now 95 years old, blind and almost deaf, Voss and the daughter who took care of him and a few relatives and neighbors gathered with me and a Courier-News photographer in the daughter's kitchen. His daughter opened the wooden outhouse and uncapped the booze. Voss took one little sip of whisky. It was the first alcoholic drink in his life. He coughed and gasped out the word "Water!" Then he said, "I wish I was with those boys now." Three weeks later he was, and there was nobody left from Company E except memories.

Joe Bennett the flu ward orderly outlived him, dying in 1998 at age 101. And finally we lost Lt. Ray Geister, whose family owned the Geister Lumber Co. After his time as a doughboy officer Ray Geister had kept working at the lumber company until he was 85. He was still mowing his lawn and working on his roses at the age of 100. He never went overseas. But as a rifle range instructor working without earplugs, he had sacrificed most of his hearing to the cause of victory. In 1944 he sacrificed even more for his country. His son Carl was killed in action while serving with the Army in that other war against Germany.

"My country, right or wrong"? Geister told me he thought it was a terrible mistake to get into the Vietnam War. So I asked if he would have dodged the draft if he had been of military age in 1968 instead of 1918. He looked shocked. "DODGE THE DRAFT?" he said. "I would have VOLUNTEERED! I would have served my country!"

When Ray Geister died Feb. 6, 2000, at age 105, he was the last surviving World War I veteran in Kane County. Now, 100 years after the war ended, there is not one veteran left anywhere in the world.

If one believes the prolific literature written by World War I veterans, the huge casualties and frustrating deadlock left most of its vets sour about war in general and reluctant to stand up to Hitler 20 years later. But in interviewing Elgin's vets, I did not find this to be true at all.

These Elginites had been naive about the world. Working in the watch factory or on farms, most had never been outside the Elgin area. This war seemed like a great adventure. A chance to see Paris! Maybe getting laid for the first time. “I had the time of my life over there,” Howard Carlson said. “I didn’t care if we did get knocked off. We didn’t worry.”

These guys also eagerly swallowed propaganda about the Germans and “Kaiser Bill” being vicious criminals out to destroy the free world. Henry Hines writes about looking at a dead German’s face and thinking about quote “what that face and its kind stood for -- for barbarism, treachery; for gorilla-like murder of Red Cross nurses; for wanton mutilation of wounded and dead Allied soldiers and the impalement of babies on bayonet points.” In today’s terminology, you’d have to call that list of indictments fake news -- every point either exaggerated or totally made up by lying British and French propagandists.

Beyond that, the doughboys never got into fighting that was long enough to disillusion and depress them. Most fought for just six weeks in the Meuse-Argonne, or never reached the front at all. Even 70 years later they remained sure they had accomplished something great.

They were wrong. Instead of being the war to end all wars as Wilson had promised, World War I actually created situations that led to a second world war, then a cold war and now seemingly eternal conflicts between the former nations of the Turkish empire, including Israel, Syria, Jordan and Iraq.

World War I was not the black and white, noble Allies versus Satanic enemies scenario we would see with Hitler and Tojo in the 1940s. Yes, the Kaiser’s Germany wanted to expand its national area and conquer new colonies and dominate Europe’s economy. But guess what? So did our allies France and Italy and Russia and Britain and Serbia. None of those European powers in 1918 was clean. But we honestly can argue that the United States pretty much WAS clean. When the poison gas cleared and a peace treaty was signed, America didn’t seize any big new empire. We just insisted on things like being able to sail across the Atlantic without being sunk by a U-boat, and letting people like the Czechs and Poles have a country of their own, and conflicts being settled by a League of Nations instead of armies. Maybe America really is an exceptional country.

People like Leo Anderson and Jake Swanson, like Charles Virisco and Carl Kruse -- like Helen Bartlett -- should be remembered every Memorial Day for bravely giving up so much of their lives for a cause that they believed was well worth it. If the reward turned out to be not equal to the price they paid, that’s as much the fault of the generations that followed as it was of those who led the world in 1918.

God bless their souls and God bless this special nation called America.