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EUROPE

‘These guys deserve better’: Upkeep of forlorn memorials to US soldiers is duo’s labor of love

By Phillip Walter Wellman
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Eric Mueller, left, and Maarten Otte hoist an American flag back onto the Henry Gunther memorial in Chaumont-Devant-Damvillers, France, after repairing the flagpole, Nov. 6, 2025. The two have taken it upon themselves to care for some of the more than 140 American memorials scattered across the area where the U.S.-led Meuse-Argonne Offensive occurred in late 1918. (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)

CHAUMONT-DEVANT-DAMVILLERS, France — From a hilltop overlooking miles of farmland, American retiree Eric Mueller stood beside a stone monument and pointed to a spot in the valley below where the last U.S. soldier killed in World War I is thought to have fallen. A former Michigan Air National Guard lieutenant, Mueller has traveled to northeastern France

twice a year for nearly a decade, logging the GPS coordinates of trench lines, bunkers and other wartime sites for a digital mapping project.

But while scouring old battlefields, he became troubled by something he never set out to find: monuments to American military units and soldiers weathered by age and suffering from neglect.

At the hilltop monument in the Meuse region, an inscription about the Army's 79th Infantry Division and Sgt. Henry Gunther, the aforementioned soldier, was barely legible and cracks ran through a panel embedded in the stone. "It bothers me that their sacrifices were recognized by these monuments and then forgotten," Mueller said. "These guys deserve better."

So in 2019, he teamed up with Dutch historian and author Maarten Otte, whose research focuses on U.S. involvement in World War I. Since then, the two have taken it upon themselves to care for some of the more than 140 American memorials Otte says are scattered across the area north of Verdun, where the U.S.-led Meuse-Argonne Offensive occurred in late 1918.

Throughout western Europe, thousands of small, privately funded memorials stand at sites where Americans fought and died during the world wars. As the 107th anniversary of World War I's end is marked Tuesday, experts say maintaining many of them has never been more difficult.



A frayed American flag is exposed to the elements Nov. 5, 2025, at a neglected monument to the all-Black U.S. Army 371st Infantry Regiment near Ardeuil-et-Montfauxelles, France. (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)

One of the primary challenges is the disappearance or death of the organizations or people originally responsible for the monuments. In such cases, towns and various associations sometimes step in to help with maintenance.

But in sparsely populated areas of northeastern France — where American memorials stand among numerous French and other Allied monuments from both world wars, as well as older ones from the Franco-Prussian War — resources are limited.



Eric Mueller, left, and Maarten Otte repair a flagpole at a monument to Henry Gunther, believed to be the last American killed during World War I, at Chaumont-Devant-Damvillers, France, Nov. 6, 2025. (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)

Otte, who lives in the region, routinely checks on the condition of the monuments. When Mueller returns for his visits, the pair tend to those that need attention.

They replace worn-out American flags with ones Mueller brings from the U.S. and do light cleaning and restoration work. Occasionally, they hire professionals to remove heavy moss and lichen buildup.

“We always do this before Nov. 11, when more Americans visit the area,” Otte said, referring to what is observed as Armistice Day in Europe and Veterans Day in the United States.

On Thursday, he was scrubbing algae from a flagpole at a memorial in the Argonne Forest honoring troops of the U.S. Army’s 77th Infantry Division. “We want the memorials to look good so people can see they’re cared for,” Otte said.



A neglected monument to the U.S. Army's 371st Infantry Regiment stands in a windswept field, near Ardeuil-et-Montfauxelles, France, Nov. 5, 2025. The 371st largely consisted of poor Black laborers from segregated South Carolina. (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)

Locations with lesser allure

While the Meuse-Argonne region welcomes a steady stream of visitors each year, it's hardly a tourist hot spot.

In Normandy, by contrast, World War II tourism helps sustain the regional economy, so officials make sure monuments and cemeteries are kept in pristine condition.

The Normandy American Cemetery alone welcomes more than a million visitors each year, according to the American Battle Monuments Commission.

The Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery, which holds the graves of more than 14,200 Americans and is the largest cemetery of its kind in Europe, receives only about 15,000 annual visitors, staffers said.

The Meuse-Argonne Offensive, a 47-day campaign that helped bring World War I to an end, remains the largest and deadliest battle in U.S. military history.

When fighting finished, American units, veterans groups and families independently built hundreds of memorials on European soil to honor fallen soldiers and commemorate military milestones.

But as Gen. John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, toured the Continent in the early 1920s, he noticed that many of these tributes lacked coordination and upkeep.

Concerned that they might deteriorate and reflect poorly on the United States, he urged the creation of a national body to oversee America's overseas commemorations.

Congress responded in 1923 by creating the American Battle Monuments Commission, appointing Pershing as its first chairman. But the agency's responsibility does not extend to most privately funded monuments.



The American Battle Monuments Commission is responsible for hiring contractors to maintain the 316th Infantry Regiment Memorial in Sivry-sur-Meuse, France, pictured here on Nov. 5, 2025. But the agency has had difficulty finding someone to do the work. (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)

Only about three dozen have been accepted into the commission's Private Memorials Program, through which the agency is paid to ensure that contractors maintain sites on behalf of the groups that own them.

And in northeastern France, the ABMC is struggling to find contractors to care for at least one of those sites, the 316th Infantry Regiment Memorial in Sivry-sur-Meuse, underscoring how difficult it can be to preserve even well-funded U.S. monuments at times.

Adam Leigland, who manages the Private Memorials Program, has received complaints about the site's condition and has been searching for a contractor for several months. "If you were to go out there today, you'd be really displeased," he said.

Stirring hearts and minds

For Americans and Europeans today who have never experienced the realities of war firsthand, smaller monuments can be especially effective because they often convey more personal details, said Ann Rigney, a former professor of comparative literature at Utrecht University in the Netherlands.

She specializes in cultural memory and the ways societies commemorate the past.

"Sometimes you need these very shocking small little details to bring home in a new way the awfulness of war ... rather than being something you ritualistically yawn at when Nov. 11 comes around," Rigney said.

Another American who understands the impact of such monuments and shares the sense of urgency to preserve them is Lilian Pfluke, a retired U.S. Army major who formerly ran the Private Memorials Program.

During her decadelong tenure beginning in the 1990s, Pfluke often heard from people concerned about neglected American war monuments that fell outside the agency's authority.

The steady stream of complaints inspired her to establish the nonprofit American War Memorials Overseas in 2008. The organization documents, promotes and helps preserve smaller, privately built military memorials honoring Americans around the world, often encouraging local groups to act and assist with fundraising. Its database now includes more than 4,600 sites.

"We don't have troops in France anymore," said Pfluke, who lives in Avignon. "Our monuments and cemeteries are our strategic presence here. They show what America has done, reflect our alliance with France and preserve the legacy of our cooperation during the world wars."

People like Mueller and Otte are not alone, Pfluke said. Others across Europe quietly do similar work, often if they live by a memorial or have personal or family ties to an area where one is located. And with war once again raging in Europe, the need to maintain that legacy feels especially urgent today, she said. "We need to keep those memories alive," she said. "We need to remember what this is all about."



A nearly illegible commemorative stone, seen here on Nov. 5, 2025, marks the spot between the French towns of Cunel and Brioules-sur-Meuse where U.S. soldiers Lt. Willoughby R. Marks and Lt. Georg M. Hollister were killed while fighting in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive during World War I. (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)