

**WRITTEN STATEMENT
OF
MAX CLELAND
SECRETARY
AMERICAN BATTLE MONUMENTS COMMISSION
BEFORE
THE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
JUNE 23, 2016**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to offer written testimony on behalf of H.R. 5420, which authorizes the American Battle Monuments Commission to acquire, operate and maintain the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial in Marne-la-Coquette, France, a suburb of Paris. We submitted this legislative proposal with the concurrence of the Administration, following review by the Department of Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and other interested agencies.

The Lafayette Squadron was created on 16 April 1916, one year prior to U.S. entry into World War I. Forty-two fliers composed the original Escadrille (thirty-eight Americans and four French officers in command). As the number of American volunteers grew, Americans flew for several French units known collectively as the Lafayette Flying Corps, in which 269 fliers served in total. Out of the 269 total American volunteers, 68 died in the air war over France. Some of the best known fliers were Kiffin Rockwell, Norman Prince, Raoul Lufbery and Eugene Jacques Bullard, the only African-American fighter pilot in World War I. When the United States entered the war in 1917, most of the Escadrille pilots joined the U.S. Air Service, teaching air combat tactics to those who followed them to France. The Lafayette Escadrille ceased to exist on February 18, 1918 and the U.S. 103rd Pursuit Squadron took on its symbols and traditions.

The memorial to these air combat pioneers was constructed in the 1926-28 period and inaugurated on July 4, 1928. The Lafayette Escadrille Memorial is a private memorial about five miles west of Paris. It honors these 269 American volunteers who flew for French and United States units during the Great War. But it is more than a memorial; it is a burial ground. A crypt beneath the memorial contains 68 sarcophagi, one for each of the 68 Americans of the Lafayette Escadrille who died in the skies over France; 49 Americans and two French officers rest there in honor today. Seventeen sarcophagi have remained empty because either the remains could not be found or were transferred.

ABMC has a history of involvement with the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial, approving the Foundation's construction plans in 1924, a predicate for any administrative agency of the U.S. Government, such as the State Department, to assist the founders. ABMC also managed the maintenance of the memorial for the Foundation from 1971 to 1983, using Foundation funds under the authority of our Monument Maintenance Program. The Foundation ended this arrangement in 1983 and over the years the original trust fund established to maintain the memorial dwindled and the memorial fell into a state of disrepair. As a World War I Centennial initiative, ABMC and the French Ministry of Defense partnered with the Foundation to complete a \$1.7M restoration project, using funds provided by the Foundation, by private donors in the United States, and by the French government. The memorial was rededicated on a beautiful spring day in Paris, on the occasion of the Centennial Anniversary of the Escadrille's establishment on April 20, 1916. It again stands as a beautiful tribute to service and sacrifice, but the Foundation is no longer able to maintain the memorial to a standard commensurate to the American sacrifice it honors.

It is time to bring the memorial and the pioneering airmen buried beneath it under the perpetual care of the U.S. Government. There are several compelling reasons to do so.

1. The vision for the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial was to have the American pilots resting together in a memorial that allowed the spirit of their enlistment to live on. This spirit reflects the historical cooperation between the United States and France. Just as France came to the aid of the United States during our revolution, the United States came to France's aid in two world wars. The memorial has become an important part of the U.S. Ambassador's Memorial Day commemorations and in other ceremonies within the American community, such as the high school graduation of the American School of Paris.
2. Since American participation in World War I began unofficially with volunteers in units such as the Lafayette Escadrille, the memorial could serve as a point-of-entry for ABMC's World War I interpretation efforts. Its location near Paris facilitates that purpose.
3. The U.S. Air Force considers the Lafayette Escadrille to be an important part of its tactical origins. The Air Force ties its history to the American men who flew with that unit and later joined the U.S. Air Service. The American pilots of the Lafayette Escadrille were combat veterans, whose wartime experiences were extremely valuable to the newly-arrived American units and the development of combat tactics within the Air Service. The Marine Corps considers Belleau Wood, which is part of the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery, to be an important part of its heritage. The continued support of the Marine Corps and its active participation at Memorial Day ceremonies is a highlight for Aisne-Marne and ABMC. The Lafayette Escadrille Memorial will serve a similar purpose for the Air Force.
4. Most importantly it's the right thing to do. The Foundation passed a resolution approving transfer to ABMC of full legal title to the memorial site, including the land, memorial, crypt and caretaker's cottage, by gift or in exchange for symbolic consideration. We have assurances that the French government is prepared to incorporate the Memorial into the bilateral treaty granting the U.S. perpetual use of French lands, at no cost or taxation, for the commemorative cemeteries and memorials that ABMC maintains in France. Representatives of the French Ministries of Defense and Interior sit on the LEM Foundation Board and voted to approve the Foundation resolution.

With the concurrence of the Foundation and the Government of France, it is appropriate that ABMC, on behalf of the American people, assume responsibility for preserving and protecting in perpetuity this memorial tribute and final resting place for pioneering combat Airmen who gave their lives in one of the most pivotal wars of the twentieth century. ABMC will incur no costs to acquire or transfer the memorial. The Commission will operate and maintain the memorial within existing appropriations.

Mr. Chairman, the American Battle Monuments Commission appreciates very much the Committee's support of our sacred mission. We believe it is time for the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial to become an important and significant addition to that mission, so that, in the words of General John J. Pershing, Commander of the World War I American Expeditionary Forces and our first Chairman, "Time Will Not Dim the Glory of Their Deeds."