

**Written Statement  
Before the  
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs  
June 7, 2018**

**The Honorable William M. Matz, Jr., Secretary  
American Battle Monuments Commission**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the mission, operations and programs of the American Battle Monuments Commission. The subject of this hearing – *Honoring Heroes: Memorializing our Nation's Veterans* – is so appropriate to our agency mission, and that sentiment inspires the thoughts I share with you this morning.

Since the agency's establishment in 1923, our purpose has not changed – to commemorate the service and achievements of America's armed forces – yet our methods have changed. We execute our mission by creating memorials worldwide where U.S. forces have served, and by maintaining overseas military cemeteries – shrines to our fallen and those that fought by their side – to a standard appropriate to the sacrifice they represent.

Our first Chairman, General John J. Pershing, set the tone for the Commission when he wrote that, "*Time will not dim the glory of their deeds.*" These simple but powerful words are the foundation of everything we do. The cemeteries and memorials we administer have been entrusted to our care by the American people – we take that as a solemn responsibility.

When the President selected me to serve as Secretary of the Commission, he presented me with an opportunity of a lifetime; one I don't take for granted. Preserving these "national treasures" as symbols of selfless devotion and beacons of freedom is not a job; it is a reverent calling, a duty.

Over Memorial Day weekend, we conducted ceremonies in 26 cemeteries, in 10 countries across four continents. On Sunday morning of that weekend, I stood at a podium at Aisne-Marne American Cemetery in France. The Aisne-Marne cemetery and the Belleau Wood battlefield behind it honor those who fell in the Aisne-Marne Campaign. Ten U.S. Army divisions and one U.S. Marine Corps brigade fought alongside French comrades in arms, in America's first major offensive campaign of the war. Memorialized there, shoulder-to-shoulder, are more than 2,600 soldiers and nearly 500 Marines, who died during that campaign with the common goal of making the world safe for democracy and bringing a final peace to Europe.

That Sunday afternoon we were at the Oise-Aisne American Cemetery, where we again offered our thanks and respect to those who served and died in service to our Nation. 6,012 war dead are buried on those beautiful grounds and 241 are listed as missing – most of whom lost their lives on nearby battlefields. One of the dead is Sergeant Joyce Kilmer, 165th Infantry, 42nd Division – he rests in Plot B, Row 9, Grave 15. Probably best known for writing the poem *Trees*, he also wrote these prophetic words taken from his poem *Rouge Bouquet*:

THERE IS ON EARTH NO WORTHER GRAVE  
TO HOLD THE BODIES OF THE BRAVE  
THAN THIS PLACE OF PAIN AND PRIDE  
WHERE THEY NOBLY FOUGHT AND NOBLY DIED.

Kilmer's poem speaks of life and death. Joyce Kilmer didn't have to put his life on the line. He served as the senior regimental statistician under the direction of the regimental chaplain. But that didn't meet his personal criteria for service to his country. He requested a transfer to the regimental intelligence section, knowing it would get him closer to the front lines. In July 1918, Kilmer's 42nd "Rainbow" Division was attempting to break German defensive positions along the Ourq River, a few kilometers from the cemetery. In eight days of fighting, the Rainbow Division lost 5,500 men – one of those men was Sergeant Joyce Kilmer.

On Sunday evening, I stood behind a ribbon at the Chateau-Thierry Monument, not far from the Aisne-Marne cemetery, to dedicate a new visitor center that tells the story of men and women like Joyce Kilmer; providing historical context for the events that occurred there 100 years ago; preserving the memory of the thousands of Joyce Kilmer's, whose unselfish willingness to serve a cause greater than them, allows us to live in a world that would be a much different and desirable place than the one we enjoy today.

One Sunday in May – three historic sites of honor and commemoration – underscoring the importance of this morning's theme: *Honoring Heroes: Memorializing our Nation's Veterans*.

What motivates a man to leave the safety of his trench, to crawl through barbed wire to attack enemy positions with rifle and bayonet when artillery and machine gun fire halts his unit's advance? What motivates someone to ignore their own wounds to care for others, all while under enemy fire? How do we ensure that we never forget such courageous service and sacrifice?

Since the 2007 opening of our Normandy American Cemetery Visitor Center, ABMC has recognized its responsibility to answer those questions by "telling the stories" of the men and women honored at its cemeteries and monuments, providing historical context for visitors now far removed from the events of the war years. Following the world wars, no one had to tell our visitors the story. They were the mothers and fathers, the widows, the brothers and

sisters of the war dead. They did not seek nor require context; they knew all too well the story. They came to grieve not to learn ... they came to say farewell.

Meticulously maintaining cemeteries and memorials is and will remain ABMC's core mission. But that alone is no longer enough to honor those who served; the Commission must also preserve and communicate their stories of competence, courage, and sacrifice. The visitor center at Chateau-Thierry is the seventh the Commission has opened since 2007. Three more are in development, all with a common purpose – to enrich the visitor's experience and understanding of the importance of these sacred sites, and the significance of the historic events that led to their creation.

We also, over the past several years, have aggressively pursued an educational outreach program in the U.S., through partnerships with universities and organizations like National History Day and the National World War II Museum in New Orleans. I invite you to visit our educational program website at [ABMCEducation.org](http://ABMCEducation.org) – to view the wealth of stories and lesson plans developed by teachers for teachers. We are updating the World War I materials, and we have begun to partner with the National Cemetery Administration on World War II content, tying the stories of our stateside national cemeteries to those from our overseas commemorative sites.

Through all of this, we have not forgotten our core mission of building monuments to commemorate service and sacrifice. Last year ABMC dedicated its 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> Federal markers in Dartmouth, England: a granite monument commemorating the Allied build-up, training and launch of the D-Day invasion from the shores of England, and a commemorative bronze plaque in the Britannia Royal Naval College, which served as XI Amphibious Force headquarters in World War II. Later this year, at the invitation of the Government of New Zealand, we expect to dedicate a U.S. memorial in the National War Memorial Park in Wellington. And a monument in Iceland commemorating operations there in World War II is in the early stages of development. When completed, these two commemorations will bring the total number of ABMC memorials, monuments and markers to 31.

Next year, we will commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the D-Day landings. To prepare for that historic event we are refreshing the exhibits and media at the Normandy visitor center, recognizing that 11 years have passed since the original exhibits opened to the public. And over the next couple of years, we also will improve the cemetery's entrance traffic flow and parking, upgrade and add to existing comfort facilities, and revamp security screening areas to better handle peak visitation periods.

At the Pointe du Hoc Ranger Monument, west of Normandy, we are developing a site master plan to address the challenges posed by the dual need of providing visitors a positive and safe experience while protecting the integrity of this historic cultural landscape. The plan will be completed by the end of this fiscal year, allowing us to define specific actions, timelines and costs for the way ahead. Together, Normandy and Pointe du Hoc are our most visited sites worldwide.

With the support of the Subcommittee, we assumed ownership of the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial Cemetery outside Paris in January 2017. The memorial honors American combat aviation pioneers, 49 of whom are interred in the crypt beneath the monument. We will better tell their incredible story next year, when we complete a conversion of an old caretaker's cottage on the site into a small visitor center. We hope to dedicate the new center on Memorial Day 2019.

The memorial cemetery is located in a rustic park environment, which makes impractical the maintenance of a "fine lawn" standard as seen in our cemetery plot areas. Nonetheless, a maintenance and rejuvenation plan has been completed by an arborist specialized in the care of ancient woodlands, who will oversee the execution of the effort to improve the appearance of the grounds while preserving their naturally rustic character. We also have plans to waterproof and repave the memorial terrace, improve the accessibility ramp, and replace paths and curbstones to raise the memorial's condition to ABMC standards.

Finally, I am happy to report that the restoration of Clark Veterans Cemetery in the Philippines is progressing well. We have obligated the \$5 million authorized for the restoration, and are in the final stages of improvements in the plot areas, where the headstones had been partially buried and unreadable since the volcanic eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in 1991. I want to thank the National Cemetery Administration for partnering with us to provide more than 3,000 new headstones to replace those at Clark cemetery that had been damaged beyond repair.

All of these programs and projects have a singular focus, to honor and memorialize America's armed forces – our heroes – for their unselfish and dedicated service and sacrifice.

The poet Archibald MacLeish served as an ambulance driver and later as an artillery officer in World War I. He fought in the Second Battle of the Marne. His brother was killed in action during the war. MacLeish's poem – *The Young Dead Soldiers* – includes this eloquent and timeless challenge:

THEY SAY, WE WERE YOUNG, WE HAVE DIED,  
REMEMBER US ...  
THEY SAY, WE LEAVE YOU OUR DEATHS:  
GIVE THEM THEIR MEANING.

So many have given us their deaths – it is for us, and our children, for generations to come, to give them meaning. That is and will remain the mission of the American Battle Monuments Commission.