

Red Roses for Heroes

It was spring 2004 almost one year after the American-led invasion of Iraq – a policy that was not well accepted in France. We had not sensed any hostility from the French people towards Americans, but many were clearly unhappy with the actions of the American government.

We had been touring battlefields near Chateau-Thierry and in particular Belleau Wood, the scene of the United States Marines' month long struggle to capture that tough piece of terrain from entrenched German defenders. Our accommodations were to the east of Chateau-Thierry in a small B&B owned by two Americans who had spent their professional careers working in Paris. They retired to enjoy the rural French lifestyle and ran the B&B as a sideline. On the evening that we arrived, over a glass of white wine, they told us the following story.

The French are great for commemorations of the events of the two world wars. The First World War is remembered each year in every town and village on 11 November typically with a simple commemoration at the town's war memorial followed by a *vin d'honneur* – a mini reception of Champagne and canapés held in the village hall. Cities frequently celebrate with elaborate parades and ceremonies, such as that at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. To a lesser extent, the Second World War is commemorated on 8 May. American contributions to both wars are recalled during ceremonies at the nineteen American military cemeteries in Europe on Memorial Day in late May.

It seems that because our hosts were known in the area as American citizens, they were honored with a formal invitation to attend ceremonies at the Aisne-Marne American Military Cemetery in Belleau, France on Memorial Day, 2003, only two months after the beginning of the locally unpopular Second Gulf War. Upon arriving at the cemetery, they mixed with the local dignitaries, American officials, members of the Paris Embassy delegation, flag bearers, and military honor guard before the commencement of the formal ceremony and speech-making. They were most impressed by the colorful and dignified placement of a single red rose atop each of the 2,289 gravestones.

After completion of the ceremonies, they approached the cemetery superintendent to offer their compliments on the placement of the flowers. Oh no, he informed them. The roses were not placed by the cemetery or even by American personnel. Early that morning French women from the surrounding villages had arrived with the flowers and they had carefully decorated each headstone. The reason, they said? Despite the current disagreement over Mideast policy, they remembered the contributions that American servicemen and women had made to their liberty. They would '*souvenir toujours*' – always remember.



Chapel (rear) at the Aisne-Marne American Military Cemetery, Belleau, France