

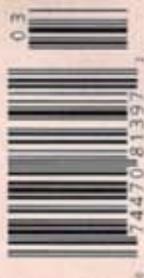
Commonweal

A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

FEBRUARY 13, 2009

LOOKING FOR FRANKIE

PETER QUINN



\$3.50 US
(\$4.25 CAN)



www.commonwealmagazine.org

The Cuban Five
Tom Quigley p. 8

Outwitting Cancer
Paul Lauritzen p. 16

Obama &
Racial Politics
Don Wycliff p. 39

Frankie's Secret

The Forgotten Costs of War

Peter Quinn

All wars end eventually, including the seemingly interminable ones being waged in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet the knowledge that no war goes on forever shouldn't obscure the ancient and unalterable fact that for many combat veterans the effects last long after the fighting stops. That truth came home to me once more this past Veterans Day. Strolling to the railway station in the Hudson River town where I live, I noticed a large wreath of red and white poppies placed before the bronze tablet in front of the library.

For more mornings than I care to recall, I rose before dawn to catch a train to the city that got me to my desk in time to do my own writing before I turned to my day job as a corporate writer and editor. Now, as a retiree, my trips mostly involve taking a late-morning train for a lunch date, and rather than dashing through darkness, I savor the changing seasonal light above the Palisades, with the city's skyline silhouetted like Oz at the river's mouth.

On this gentle autumn morning, I stopped for the first time to examine the tablet's long columns of names and received a small surprise. The memorial honored not those who'd served in World War II, as I'd presumed, but the more than two hundred villagers who'd served in World War I. The heavy preponderance of ethnic names instantly reminded me of the village's former life, before it morphed—"declined" is the word the dwindling remnant of old-time residents prefers—from a hardworking factory town into a comfortable suburb of well-paid professionals who commute to and from New York City.

Listed at the top are the twelve villagers "Killed in Service"—roughly 5 percent of those who'd served. Years ago, hitching through Europe, I remember being overwhelmed

by the vastness of the World War I military cemeteries that I came upon in Flanders. On another trip, to Scotland, I was incredulous at the number of World War I dead recorded on a monument in a small town on the Isle of Skye. The losses from my village weren't on that scale, yet the sorrow inflicted on the families that suffered them by what, with a mix of innocence and optimism, was once referred to as "the Great War" couldn't have been any less heartbreaking. (I subsequently went looking for the World War II monument, which I found in front of the local VFW post. It lists only those who "died in service," not all those who served. There are thirty-one names. I'm told by the current mayor that no villagers died in the Korean and Vietnam Wars and, so far, in Iraq.)

Despite the wreath of poppies, which marked the ninetieth anniversary of the armistice declared on November 11, 1918, the Great War and the grief that followed in its wake are largely forgotten. If the descendants of those killed live nearby, I don't know them and have never seen a mention of them in the local newspaper's coverage of patriotic celebrations and veterans' activities.

As I pondered the names of those who served and those killed, I recalled a similar World War I monument that stands not all that far from here, in another blue-collar river-town-turned-suburb, on the New Jersey side of the Hudson. Though it's been years since I've seen or even thought about it, I know that one of the servicemen it was erected to honor was my Uncle Frankie, my mother's oldest brother. (Baptized Jeremiah Francis, he was known among family and friends by the informal version of his middle name.)

Although he died in 1939, eight years before I was born, I was fascinated by the photograph on display in my grandmother's home of the doughboy with the sergeant's stripes and wan smile. As much as I pumped my mother for stories about my uncle's wartime experiences, I never got very far. "Frankie didn't talk about the war," she said.

Unlike World War II, which seemed more current event than history, most of what I knew as a boy about World War I came from grainy newsreels of *Over There*: soldiers in shaving-bowl helmets climbing out of trenches and slogging across a badly cratered, barbed-wire-choked landscape. When my friends and I played soldiers, we were GIs at Iwo Jima and the Bulge, not doughboys—even in the 1950s the word had a quaint, antique ring—at Belleau Wood or Saint-Mihiel.

In the intervening decades, World War I has slipped fur-

Peter Quinn, a frequent contributor, is the author of the novels *Banished Children of Eve* and *Hour of the Cat*.

ther into obscurity. At the time I was working on this article, the son of a close friend—a recent graduate of a prestigious university—inquired what I was writing about. I answered, “Doughboys.”

“I didn’t know you wrote about food,” he said.

I explained the kind of doughboys I meant. He said he’d never heard the term.

The reasons for this country’s amnesia about the war aren’t hard to fathom. The war’s origins in the assassination of an Austrian prince and a tangle of alliances were never very clear to most Americans. Germany’s policy of unrestricted submarine warfare, which President Woodrow Wilson gave as America’s *casus belli*, didn’t offer the same clarion call as the attacks on Fort Sumter and Pearl Harbor. There was significant opposition to the president’s decision.

William Jennings Bryan, Wilson’s secretary of state, resigned in June 1915 over what he saw as the rising influence of “the jingo element” and the president’s unequal attitude toward the British blockade and German submarine warfare. The vote in Congress to declare war wasn’t unanimous. After an impassioned three-hour speech against entering the war by Sen. Robert La Follette of Wisconsin (the text, which is worth reading in full, can be found at www.wisconsinhistory.org) the Senate voted for war 82 to 6; the House, 373 to 50. (Jeanette Rankin of Montana, the first woman in Congress, repeated her no vote in 1941, when she became the only member to vote against declaring war on Japan.)

Although they were on the winning side, Americans were quick to put the war behind them and “return to normalcy.” That accounts perhaps for why, alone among America’s major twentieth-century conflicts, World War I has no national memorial in Washington, D.C. In 1954, when President Dwight Eisenhower authorized that Armistice Day be changed to Veterans Day, it ceased to be commemorated with its own holiday.

Wedged between the decisive conflicts of the Civil War and World War II, which played out mostly in dramatic battles and fast-moving campaigns fought across vast landscapes, World War I reeked of futility. The Western Front, the main cockpit of the conflict and the scene of horrific slaughter at Verdun and the Somme, became a synonym for bloody stalemate. “The war to end all wars” proved mere intermission. Before long, euphoria gave way to isolationism, the Depression, and another, even more destructive war. The fall of the Austrian, Ottoman, and Russian empires—all consequences of World War I—opened a Pandora’s box of ethnic conflicts that continue to haunt us in the Balkans, Iraq, and Palestine.

From the perspective of the first decade of the twenty-first century, it’s unclear, at least to me, whether American intervention on the Allied side wasn’t ultimately counter-



Squad of American soldiers listening to one of their comrades playing the organ in the half-wrecked old church in Exermont, in the Argonne, France

productive. Without it, the Allies would have been forced into a compromise peace with Germany. At worst, Germany would have been victorious. There’s no doubt that Germany was an aggressively ambitious state. But would the triumph of the Wilhelmine monarchy, a mainline European nation with an evolving parliamentary system and the continent’s largest socialist party, have been a catastrophe?

Germany’s defeat opened the way for the rise of the Nazis and helped the Bolsheviks to secure their own nightmare empire in the east. An undefeated, dominant Germany would have had no need to turn to a revanchist despot to restore its power and prestige. At a minimum, it would have been a potent deterrent to Soviet ambitions. We’ll never know, of course. And yet, while it would be wrong to argue that the homicidal regime that took power in 1933 in Germany and the war that followed were inevitable consequences of the German surrender (there were other important variables, including the peace settlement at Versailles, the worldwide economic collapse, the encroaching senility of German President Paul von Hindenburg), could any outcome have been worse than the one the Allied victory opened the door to: Hitler and the Holocaust?

Beyond some basic facts, I never learned much about Frankie’s experience as a doughboy in the Great War. An

unskilled factory worker who hadn't gone beyond the eighth grade, he joined up in the summer of 1917, shortly after the United States declared war on Germany. His parents, who'd emigrated from County Cork in Ireland, weren't overjoyed by his decision. Stirred by the unsuccessful 1916 Easter uprising by Irish nationalists, they suspected that at some level the war was being waged in defense of the British Empire. They kept their doubts within the family. Publicly, they supported the war effort and Frankie's enlistment.

During basic training, when his unit was asked if anyone knew how to drive, Frankie raised his hand. He'd never driven but figured they'd teach him once he got behind the wheel. He shipped out to France, my mother recalled, in late 1917 as a driver with the U.S. Army Ambulance Corps.

Full deployment didn't come until spring 1918, when the Germans mounted a desperate, all-out offensive, and the burgeoning American forces were thrown in pell-mell to help stop them. The vast majority of U.S. combat losses—50,300 killed in action, 198,000 wounded and gassed, and 41,000 shell-shocked—fell in the single six-month period between May and November 1918. It's a reminder of how primitive the state of military sanitation and medicine remained until recent times that 62,000 died from disease—significantly more than in combat—and over half in U.S. training camps.

As painful as they were, America's wartime losses paled beside those of the other combatants: a million dead from Britain and its empire, 2 million Germans, 1.7 million French, 460,000 Italians, et al. But the doughboys' plunge into the murderous intensity of industrialized warfare made a crucial difference. The Allies went on to win, thanks in large measure to two latecomers to the war: Yanks and tanks.

Amid the carnage, the Ambulance Corps ferried the wounded from the front to medical stations directly behind the lines, a relatively short trip that mud, shell holes, and random bombardments often turned into a nightmare. The scale and nature of the injuries suffered by troops on every side often beggared description.

In his intriguing, enlightening book *The Illusion of Victory: America in World War I*, historian Tom Fleming notes "the severe morale problems" among many of "the woman volunteers who had driven ambulances, nursed, and manned the YMCA canteens." Though warned about what to expect amid the shambles of hospital tents, one volunteer described the shock she felt this way: "When you get here the difference is [like] studying the laws of electricity and being hit by lightning."

The number of people who died while being transported is unknown, but it must have been substantial. The English poet Wilfred Owen, killed in the very last week of the war, came as close as anyone to capturing the indescribable horror of confronting the shattered body of a fallen comrade when he asked his readers to imagine what it was like

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,

And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud...

Never a faithful letter writer, Frankie stopped writing entirely during the summer of 1918. His frantic family was relieved when a two-word note arrived shortly before the armistice: "I'm OK." He remained in Europe an entire year after war's end, a temporary expatriate whose blue-collar background set him apart from literary expatriates like Hemingway and Dos Passos (who'd also both been ambulance drivers) whom Gertrude Stein dubbed the "Lost Generation." More mystified than hurt by Frankie's decision, especially as neighbors' sons rushed to get back, his immigrant parents rejoiced when he finally came home.

He returned to a country in which a coalition led by nativists and religious Fundamentalists had succeeded in achieving enactment of a constitutional amendment banning alcoholic beverages. Like a lot of Americans, particularly urban ethnics, Frankie not only ignored Prohibition but turned it to his advantage. He became a much-in-demand bartender in a succession of New York speakeasies. (With an Irish sense of irony, he listed his occupation in the 1920 census as "shipping clerk.")

His family noticed a change in him after the war. He never stayed long in any job. Despite all his acquaintances, he had no close friends. He married but rarely brought his wife around his family. They had no children, and he was no longer living with her when he died suddenly on Christmas day, at age forty-four, three months after a new war started in Europe.

Nobody in the family ever seemed sure what exactly killed him (and if they were sure, they never talked about it). At various times, I heard pneumonia, pleurisy, and a heart attack. Several years ago, a relative with an interest in genealogy sent away for a copy of his death certificate. When it arrived, the cause of death was blacked out. She left it at that. Nobody ever described Frankie as depressed. "He was different when he came back," was all my mother said. "It was as if he was keeping a secret."

Whatever his secret, Frankie died without revealing it. Yet he did leave a clue. The year he arrived home from France, he found an income-tax form waiting for him. My mother watched as he took a pen and printed across it DECEASED. He sent her to mail it for him and gave her a twenty-five-cent reward.

At one level, Frankie could be counted among the lucky ones. He returned alive and physically unscathed. But like untold numbers of soldiers before and since—some memorialized on bronze tablets and marble walls, many not, others in combat this very moment—the wounds Frankie sustained were of a different kind. Unseen, as deep as they were unspoken, they stayed with him until he died.

Frankie: *requiescat in pace.* ■