

A VISIT TO THE AMERICAN CEMETERIES IN EUROPE

BY MARTHA A. WATSON

With my sister I sailed from New York on June 16, 1923. We left the ship at Cherbourg and proceeded by rail to Paris where we arrived June 24, 1923. I commenced at once to consider the best way to visit and study the war districts of France. I found there were several sightseeing automobile companies which made regular trips giving one a choice of a one or two days' trip. I called at these offices and obtained itineraries but found these did not cover all the ground I wished to see. My purpose was to combine the battlefields and cemeteries but the regular trip did not offer the opportunity I desired.

It was suggested to me that I call at the American Graves Registration Bureau and ask their advice about visiting the cemeteries. This I did and there I met Herbert Wine, an American, who gave me the information I desired. He advised me to make the visits in two days, making two trips, taking a day for each. The first day was to be a circular automobile trip, leaving Paris in the morning, visiting Belleau Woods Battlefield and Cemetery, Chateau-Thierry, Reims, and back to Paris in the evening. The next trip was to go by train from Paris to Verdun and there take an automobile, visiting the forts around Verdun, the Ossuary, Douaumont and to the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery, which is several miles farther on, then back to Verdun and from there, by train, back to Paris. This I decided to do.

TRIP NUMBER ONE

With my sister and the Clark Party, which consisted of about forty school teachers from Rochester, New York, I left Paris Monday, July 2, at seven o'clock in the morning for my first day's trip to the battlefields. We went with the Mayflower Touring Company and our route covered the battlefields of Belleau Woods, Chateau-Thierry, Reims, the Marne, and the Aisne. We started due west from Paris but were soon going in a northerly direction. About nineteen miles from Paris we came

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M. Henry Argonne Cemetery
Romagne St. Remondouilly *Doit*

Sedan, le 30.10. 1923.

Sedan. - H. Bourguinat.

Les Marchandises voyagent aux risques et périls du destinataire.

	1 Gede fleurs naturelles	10:00
PAYE COMPTANT		
<i>Godard</i>		
<i>WBS</i>		
	DECORATION OF GRAVE.	WBS/81
NAME:	Donald H. MacRAE,	
	Cpl. M. G. Co., 168th Inf.,	
LOCATION:	Row 21, Bl. D, Grave 23, Cem. 1232.	
DATE:	October 30th, 1923.	
DESCRIPTION:	Bouquet of asters, carnations, dahlias & chrysanthemums.	
REFERENCE:	Mrs. Murda MacRae, c/o Miss Martha A. Watson, Historical Dept., Des Moines, Iowa.	

Faefimile of memorandum of method for decorating with flowers the graves
 of American soldiers in France.

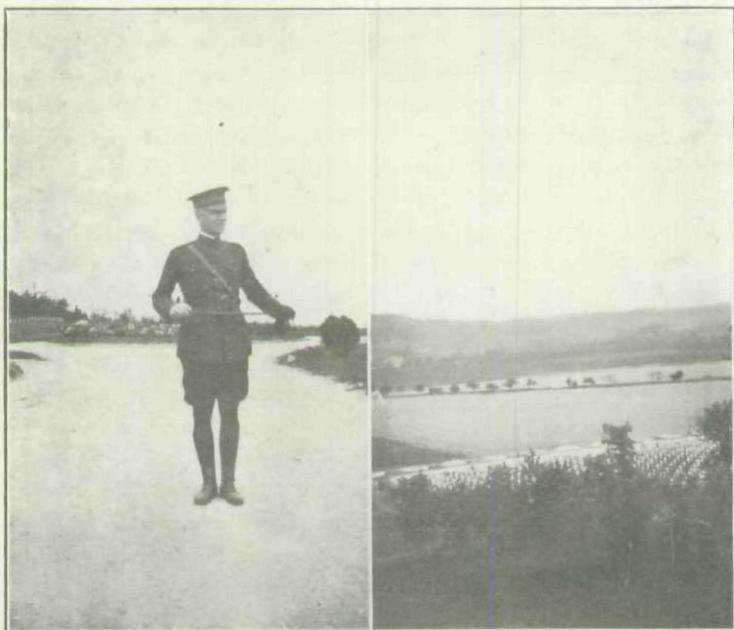
to the town of Claye, which was for a time the headquarters of Joffre and the nearest approach to Paris made by the Germans during the war. The town hall at Claye was destroyed by the Germans in 1914. The Canal of the Marne is seen at this point and runs for some distance along our way.

Our first stop was at Meaux, where we visited the beautiful cathedral. This cathedral was not injured during the war and is in a perfect state of preservation. In the early part of September, 1914, fearing the invasion of the Germans, 13,000 out of 14,000 inhabitants left Meaux with the civilian authorities. This road leading from Paris to Meaux is called Taxicab Avenue, owing to the fact that at one time it was feared the Germans would reach Paris, and Joffre ordered all of the taxicabs and vehicles of all kinds in Paris to be loaded at once with soldiers and driven to Meaux.

Continuing on our way we passed the ground called "Bloody Angle," where the roads form a triangle and where there was much blood shed. We went through Lucy-de-Bocage, location of the Second Division and Fifth Marines, and where a stone is placed in memory of the Fifth Marines. We passed through Torcy, taken by the First Division.

Our next stop was at Belleau Woods Battlefield and Aisne-Marne Cemetery which are side by side. Belleau Woods is a sad sight with its tall trees standing bare and black, killed by the deadly gas. It gives one some idea of the work of this poisonous weapon. One wonders that any of our boys survived it. Belleau Woods Battlefield has now been purchased by the American Memorial Association and will be kept for a national park. We were told that this purchase was made to prevent some speculator from buying the grounds for an amusement park and building a large hotel there. A Mrs. Frazier (I think from New York), president of the association, and fifteen other women, started the fund by giving \$1,000 each. This battlefield and the Aisne-Marne Cemetery are connected. All visitors are asked to register at the cemetery and to leave a donation to the fund. I do not think any American citizen could stand on these grounds and not have a desire to help pay for them. I left an American dollar (many gave French money), as I felt that was more appropriate. It was a small amount for so worthy a cause,

but if every visitor would give that much the sum would soon be raised. Captain Campbell, superintendent of the cemetery and grounds, told us we were on American soil just as much as if we were in Washington, D. C. These grounds were to be dedicated July 22, 1923.



Captain Campbell (American), in Belleau Woods Cemetery, from the command at Belleau Woods, France. top of the hill looking down.
July 2, 1923

Captain Campbell, a most interesting man, showed us over the battlefield, pointing out where the principal fighting took place. The Forty-second Division did some of its heaviest fighting here. He pointed out Mares Farm, where he said was the turning point, the "Gettysburg" of the war. The cemetery is beautifully kept. The graves are all marked by white crosses and are systematically arranged. The caretaker's house is a neat little cottage surrounded with flowers and vines, and just in front of the graves is a flower garden which forms a very attractive little park. There are 2,163 American boys buried in this cemetery, and Captain Campbell said there were 2,000 soldiers and 85 marines somewhere in Belleau Woods, whose bodies had not been found,

or who were wandering over the country demented, with a record of "missing in action." He said they were continually finding bodies and they were often fully identified. He said they hoped finally to have every body located. It was very interesting to hear him tell of the appreciation of the French people. He asked us to tell the people at home, for him, that the French were not ungrateful, as they seem to think, for what our boys have done for them and then he added, "If you could have seen the little children carrying flowers on Decoration Day to decorate the graves of the American soldiers, you would know that the French people are not only deeply grateful, but are teaching their children to be so."

Beyond Belleau Woods to the northwest lies Chateau-Thierry. We drove through the streets and saw much of the destruction. It has been partly restored but still shows much sign of the devastation of war. Chateau-Thierry is one of the places of which Americans are justly proud for their part in the war. From here we passed from one town to another, all of them having been almost entirely destroyed. At this time this is said to be the most devastated part of France, as many parts have been rebuilt and the work of reconstruction is going on all of the time, but it will be many years before the traces of war disappear.

We went through Vaux, a town where 5,000 American shells fell in twenty-four hours and the town was literally wiped out. We saw many large stones which had been marked in memory of the different divisions that fought in this section. Stones to the memory of the One Hundred and Eighth and One Hundred and Ninth divisions, the Forty-second and Twenty-sixth divisions, and one to the Forty-second and Seventy-seventh divisions.

Our next stop was at Reims, where we had our lunch, a very late lunch, at a pretty little hotel which had been almost destroyed in the war but had since been rebuilt. The grounds at the back of the hotel looked like fairyland, with beautiful flowers, and rocks, with running water forming a waterfall. Many rustic seats provided a way by which the visitors could enjoy this restful sight. The town of Reims was almost entirely ruined but has been partly restored. The beautiful Reims cathedral is only a shell, and to stand and look at such destruction makes one realize more than ever what war means, not only to the parents who

lose their sons, but to the homes and country where fighting takes place. I could not help but think, as I was viewing these ruins, that we as Americans who lost no dear ones have very little conception of the real suffering and sorrow caused by the Great War. Because we had often to deny ourselves a little white bread and sugar and to buy some liberty bonds, we felt we did our part and thought we suffered in the doing!

Leaving Reims we went almost due north until we came to Hill 108, where 7,800 "Blue Devils" (French soldiers) were killed at one time. This was done by the Germans lowering a shaft and placing a bomb at the bottom, which blew up the hill. Here we got out, walked over the hill and looked down into the pit. In our walk we had to be very careful of the barbed wire, which still formed a perfect network all over the hill.

From here we passed through Berry-au-Bac, which had been a town of 7,000 or 8,000 people and now is *nothing*. It is entirely wiped out. The town was taken and retaken about fifty times during the war. We next came to Cholera Farm, which our guide said got its name from the fact that everything in France that was bad was given the name of "cholera," and that it was sure death to all who went to this farm. At about this point we came to the Hindenburg Line, and from there we went west for some distance and after passing through several villages came to Soissons, where some of the heaviest fighting of the war took place. From Soissons we took a southwesterly course and, after passing through a few more miles of the war-stricken country, again came to Meaux, where we took the same road over which we came, back to Paris.

All along our journey we saw trenches, dugouts, barbed wire entanglements, ruins, and every evidence of war. Our guide told us the story of a soldier who said, "It will take forty years to win the war, one year to lick the Kaiser and thirty-nine to clear away the barbed wire." It certainly looked like that might be true.

We saw many cemeteries on our drive, Italian, French, British, and German. Three large Italian cemeteries, each grave marked with a green cross with the Italian colors in the center, were on our route. The French and German cemeteries were often side by side and when we inquired the reason for this, we were

told that the French took care of the graves of the German soldiers who were buried on French territory and the Germans took care of the French soldiers who were buried on German soil. The German graves are marked with black crosses.

Our trip was an interesting one from every point of view. We drove through the valley of the Marne for miles. It is a beautiful country. The Marne River is not very wide but it is clear and pretty. We were also in the valley of the Vesle and the valley of the Aisne, all of which was very pretty country. We passed the place where the American gas was used and the bare, dead trees were still standing, bearing proof of this deadly weapon.

We returned to Paris about ten o'clock at night, after a two-hundred mile ride, that we will never regret taking. We were very tired and glad to get to our hotel. We had been in the machine from seven in the morning until ten at night. Stops were made only at Meaux, Belleau Woods, Reims, and Hill 108. This completed our first day's trip to the battlefields.

TRIP NUMBER TWO

We left Paris by train Tuesday, July 10, at 8:07 A. M. On our way to Verdun we passed through much of the same territory we went through by automobile on our previous trip. However, very little of the devastation of the country was visible from the car window, and we were glad to have had the opportunity of seeing it in a more leisurely way. Our train reached Verdun about noon and we were met by a Cook touring agent (the Cook Agency of Paris had made this arrangement for us) and were taken to the hotel. After lunch we went by automobile (my sister, one man, and myself in the party) to visit the forts around Verdun.

Fort de Vaux, a short distance northeast of Verdun, was our first stop. This was a fort of great importance during the war. From the top of this fort the country could be viewed for miles around and the enemy be sighted for a great distance. We entered the fort with two guides, each carrying a light, and were taken under ground. Long narrow passages led one from another in every direction to the places where the soldiers ate and slept. We went down many steps and turned dark corners. Without guides I am quite sure we never could have found

our way out. It was a wet, ugly underground passage and I was glad when we started for the top and reached the light from the entrance.

From this point we took a northwesterly direction until we came to Douaumont. This was another fort which played an important part in the World War. One hundred thousand German shells fell here and the fort, and village of the same name, was each a mass of ruins.

Our next stop was at the Ossuary at Thiaumont Farm, about one mile from Douaumont. The Ossuary at the present time is but a hut, gift of the American committee. It contains the first bones collected. A fund is being raised to build a strictly neutral ossuary surrounded by four chapels reserved for the dead of different religions. (I brought home printed matter explaining the Ossuary, which is on file in the War Division of the Historical Department.)

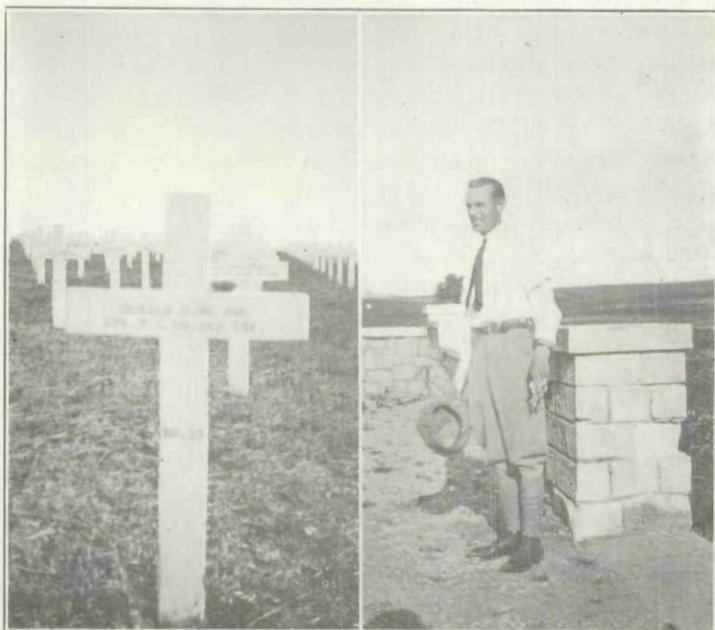
Just beyond this point we came to the famous Bayonet Trench, a permanent memorial erected to the memory of 170 French heroes who, while waiting the signal to attack, were buried by a shell explosion while standing in the trenches. The monument was erected by an American, Mr. George F. Rand, of Buffalo, New York, who visited the place and was deeply touched by the story. On the entrance to the gate is inscribed, "Inaugure Le 8 Decembre Par A Millerand President De La Republique Et H. Wallace Ambassadeur Des Etats-Unis."¹

Our next stop was at the Kronprinz's Observatory. This was a house which had been the home of a French family but had been taken during the war and used as an observatory by the Crown Prince, as it commanded a good view of the surrounding country. We were met at the door by the man who had owned and previously lived in the house. He could not speak English but his son, Ollers Leriche, who was there could speak a little English and told us a very sad story of how their home was destroyed, only the shell of which is now standing, of a brother who was killed in action, and that he himself had served in the war. He was a young, frail looking boy, but refined and educated. My sister took pictures of this boy, his father and the

¹"Inaugurated December 8th by A. Millerand, President of the Republic and H. Wallace, Ambassador of the United States."

house, which are on display in the War Division of the Historical Department.

Over the door of this house was the following: "Hdqrs. 3rd Div. U. S. Army. During the month of Oct. 1918 after the capture of Montfaucon by the Americans, this building, the former post of command of the Crown Prince of Germany and from which he observed the battle of Verdun in 1916. Hdqrs. 3rd. Div. U. S. A. The periscope used by the Crown Prince was sent to the U. S. Military Academy at West Point." This



Meuse-Argonne Cemetery, France.
Grave of Donald MacRae, of Des
Moines, in the foreground.

W. B. Shield (American), in charge
of the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery,
France.

July 10, 1923

house was in the old town of Montfaucon which was entirely destroyed during the war. The old town was built on a hill, thus making a splendid place for an observatory, but the new Montfaucon, which has been rebuilt since the war, was built in the valley. We were told this was on account of its being a farming district and it made it easier on the horses. The old Montfaucon was called "A hell for horses."

From here we went on to Romagne, five miles distant, and visited the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery, this being our objective point when we started. This cemetery contains the graves of 14,000 American boys.² It is the largest military cemetery in the world and is a most impressive sight. Each grave is marked with a white cross. In the center of some of the crosses we observed a triangle, and when we inquired the meaning of this we were told they marked the graves of Jewish soldiers.

The cemetery is laid out in four sections, A, B, C, and D. In each section the graves are numbered by rows and any grave can be found in a few minutes. A card index on file in the office of the information bureau at the cemetery tells where any grave is located. The system seems to be perfect with no complications whatever. We visited the grave of Corporal Donald MacRae of Des Moines, and took some pictures of the grave, also a picture of W. B. Shield, the American officer in charge of the cemetery. We brought these pictures home and gave them to Corporal MacRae's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Murdo MacRae. The name on the cross at his grave was misspelled. I took this matter up with the Graves Registration Bureau in Paris and had it changed. They are very anxious to have everything correct and are glad for suggestions. I was asked by Mrs. MacRae to plant a perennial on her son's grave and was given money for that purpose, but this they would not allow. They want the graves all kept alike, and after being there I can see the reason for it. However, Mr. Shield said if I would leave the money with him he would get fresh flowers and decorate the grave as often as convenient, and would send a receipt each time to Mr. and Mrs. MacRae for the amount spent. This I did and the receipt comes regularly. It also names the kind of flowers purchased. [See illustration accompanying this article.] This he told me he did for all who wished it. I believe if all of the parents had known how well the cemeteries are cared for in France, they would have been more willing to leave the bodies of their sons there.

One of the things which helped to relieve the country of its look of destruction was the beautiful poppies, which were bloom-

²W. B. Shield, the officer in charge of the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery, told us if the bodies of none of the American boys had been returned to America, this cemetery would have contained over twenty thousand graves. Many bodies were returned to the United States, and many were brought to this and to other permanent cemeteries from elsewhere in France where they fell.

ing in great profusion along all of our drives. These poppies are not confined to Flanders Fields, but are found all through France. It is no wonder their praises have been sung, for the brilliant red of this flower, scattered over the fields and along the roadside, makes one of the prettiest pictures I have ever seen. They are encouraging these flowers to bloom in the American cemeteries, and they seem a fitting flower for the decoration of our soldiers' graves.

We would gladly have spent several hours wandering through the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery where so many of our boys rest but reluctantly took our seats in the automobile and started on our way back. The driver did some fast driving, taking the nearest way wherever there was a choice, and we just made our train. We did not have time to get anything to eat at Verdun, so had our dinner on the train. We reached Paris about ten o'clock at night and were very tired, but as on our previous trip, felt we were well repaid and were not sorry we divided our trips as we did.

Later in the summer when we reached Brussels we considered a trip to Flanders Fields, but upon inquiry were told if we had visited the battlefields in France we had seen the most devastated places caused by the war, as Flanders Fields had been practically reclaimed. Therefore, we concluded to be satisfied with what we had already seen, and not attempt this extra two days' journey.

During our stay in Brussels we visited the spot where Edith Cavell, the English nurse, was executed by the Germans. She was kept in prison for months for assisting the English soldiers. She was given but little food and was tortured in many ways, and being of a highly nervous temperament, it was said her strength was practically gone before she was executed. Her body was taken to England for burial and a beautiful monument is erected to her memory in London. Later a young Belgian nurse was shot at the same spot. She, however, never lost her nerve and it is stated that at the last she threw up her head and said "I am glad to die for my country." A statue erected to her memory in Brussels shows her in that attitude. There were also many soldiers (about thirty-five) shot by the Germans at this same place. It is now enclosed by iron posts, surrounded by an iron chain, and just in front of it is a marble slab containing the names of all of the soldiers and nurses executed there by the Germans.

WAR MUSEUMS OF EUROPE

While I was in Europe I visited the war museums in all of the principal cities. In Paris the museum is housed in the Hotel des Invalides, a building originally built for invalid veterans, with room for 5,000 pensioners. Now only a small portion of the building is used for that purpose. One part of it is used for the officers' headquarters, another for the tomb of Napoleon, and the rest for museums.

One wing of this building is devoted to the World War collection of souvenirs and consists of displays belonging to the Allies. One floor of this wing is devoted to the American display and is the most complete of any I saw while in Europe. This collection consists of war weapons, uniforms, pictures, etc. There were a number of wax figures representing the American soldier dressed in the uniform of the different branches of the army, and depicting the boys in action. This made a splendid display. I noticed several portraits of General Pershing. Some were of the head and shoulders, while one was a full length portrait, in oil, and it made a striking appearance. I did not learn how this collection was obtained, whether it was a gift or was purchased, but however they came by it, it is certainly worthy of imitation.

In the open court of this building, or in the "Cour d'Honneur," may be seen the historic railway car in which the Armistice was signed on November 11, 1918, and which was installed in this court on April 28, 1921. On a card at the top of the car is the following inscription: "Wagon du Marechal Foch Dans Lequel A Ete Signe L'Armistice du 11 Novembre 1918."³

On the car are the words, "Compagnie International Des Wagons-Lites Et Des Grands Express Europeens. No. 2419 D Voiture-Restaurant Dining-Car No. 2419 D."⁴

In another building in Paris is to be found a panoramic picture of the war. It is in the Pantheon de la Guerre, a building built specially for this picture. The inside of the building is dome shaped and the painting is in sections, painted on the wall, and each section depicts one of the Allied countries in action.

³"Car of Marshall Foch in which was signed the Armistice of November 11, 1918."

⁴"International Company of Sleeping Cars and of Great European Express, No. 2419 D.—Restaurant Car—Dining Car No. 2419 D."

The prominent men of each country who figured in the war are standing in the foreground and can easily be recognized. It is a remarkably realistic picture, and is one of historical value.

In London I found the war trophies were not all together, but were in two buildings. I was told I would find the collection in Whitehall, so I went there first. They do have a great many there and I spent a half day wandering among them and studying them. The man in charge was very interesting and when I told him of my work along this line, he was most kind in explaining and showing me what they had. One of the things which interested me greatly was the relief maps showing the battlefields and locations of the different armies in battle. They had many valuable souvenirs which had been picked up from the battlefields, but the principal war museum is housed in the Crystal Palace, some distance from the city.

The Crystal Palace is reached either by bus or train, and as the train is the quicker way and leaves the station every few minutes, I decided to go that way. The trip to the Palace takes about thirty minutes and your ticket admits you to the Palace. The train runs into the entrance and when you alight you are in the Palace itself. However, that does not mean you are in the part you want to see, for it is an immense place, and I walked for what seemed to me miles, from one part of the building to another, before I found the war exhibit. At last I located it and wandered around viewing the souvenirs, flags, and all kinds of war materials, first of one country and then another, some of them with wonderful collections, but I could not find anything from America. I at once felt indignant and inquired why we were not represented. The man in charge told me very kindly it was because America had not donated anything—that every article in the museum had been given by the different countries. This was a great surprise to me and put a new phase on the situation. Instead of feeling hard towards Great Britain I found our own government was to blame. They had a small American flag displayed, but this, the man told me, was one they had purchased and had no historical value.

The man with whom I had my conversation was very pleasant and seemed anxious to have America represented in the museum. He told me he thought we would have no trouble in getting a set

of the British war medals in exchange for a set of ours, if we would take the matter up through our government. This would certainly be a good exchange for us, as their set consists of about forty medals, nearly all made of silver and are therefore expensive, while we have but six in our set and they are not of much intrinsic value.⁵

In this display the French collection was most attractive and unique. It consisted in part, of miniature wax figures of the French generals in uniform, which are so perfect they can be recognized at once. This collection is protected by a glass case.

In every country we visited the tomb of the unknown soldier and invariably found it covered with fresh flowers. The war memorials would be hung with wreaths, or have flowers at the base. We took kodak pictures of these and bought postcard pictures of everything connected with the war, wherever it was possible. The tomb of the unknown soldier of England is in Westminster Abbey, London, the one of France is under L'Arc de Triomphe, in Paris, and of Italy, in the front of the beautiful Vittorio Emanuele II Building, in Rome.

I bought a number of medals which were given by the different allied countries during the war and, by doing so, have started what I hope will finally grow into a complete collection.⁶ However, at the present time we do not have any of those belonging to our own government.

Of all the wonderful experiences of my trip, with their broadening influence, nothing stands out like the trips to the battlefields. They have given me a better insight into and a broader view of the suffering and dangers to which our boys were subjected, and more sympathy for those who fought and suffered so long and so bravely before we entered the war. Let us pray this may never be repeated.

⁵At the Curator's suggestion I wrote to Congressman C. C. Dowell asking if our government would furnish us with a set of medals awarded for meritorious service during the war, to be displayed in the Historical Department, and also if the government would exchange a set with the English government for our use in the department. Mr. Dowell's answer was that the government would furnish the medals to the Historical Department at cost price, plus charge for having engraved on each medal the words "For exhibition purposes only." In the matter of exchanging a set with the English government Mr. Dowell said he could find no way by which that could be done.

⁶The medals purchased were the French Legion of Honor, French Medaille Militaire, French Croix de Guerre with Palm and Star, Belgium Croix de Guerre, Italian Croix de Guerre, Roumania Croix de Guerre and the British War Medal 1914-1918.

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