

Tribute to William Ward, my great-uncle whom I knew only by his prayer book

Tom Ward
November 8, 2024



Tom Ward

Approximately 120 miles East of Paris lies the Meuse-Argonne American Military Cemetery. There, some 14,246 American soldiers are buried, all casualties of a 47-Day Battle which lasted from September 26 until November 11, 1918, the day commemorated for many years as Armistice Day and now known as Veterans' Day. In addition to the soldiers buried at Meuse-Argonne, the remains of another 12,000 Americans who died in that final campaign of "President Woodrow Wilson's War to end all Wars" were returned to the US. One of the 12,000 repatriated war dead was my great-uncle, William Ward. William became a casualty in the opening American offensive against the battle-honed German troops.

Just a few months before, he, at the age of 18, kissed his mother, his two brothers, his sister and his nieces and nephews farewell. His mother was just a child when the civil war was fought in the United States. Now it was one of her own children whom she sent off to war.



In late September 1918, William Ward was no longer a newly inducted soldier marching over the Smithfield Street Bridge in Pittsburgh to board a train to Philadelphia and then ship off to France. He was no longer playing cards in the hull of the ship that brought him to France.

He stood on a multi-front battlefield honed with trenches and barbed wire and emptied of flora and fauna. He must have been able to smell the aftereffects of cannon fire, and hear the first makeshift American combat planes that "softened" the enemy lines from above.

Ward's commanding officer at some point ordered everyone to ready for the offensive and troops formed rows of attack lines with the front rows facing almost certain death.

William Ward may have nervously looked into the sky, witnessing the same steady sun that had shined upon him since his birth as he awaited the inevitable order to begin the offensive. He may have noticed how the sun pierced through the wispy clouds that reliably changed their forms every few moments as they patiently crawled across the skyline, even in times of war. William clutched his M-1 rifle, and lined up awaiting the order to commence the offensive.

The enemy forces before him were far fewer but very well-armed. As it was said, any one of them who "did not have a machine gun had a cannon."

Suddenly the order came from Ward's commanding officer and the charge was launched. A German commander surely responded by calling out "Feuer!" In the Americans' charge, bullets struck not only William's body but many of those who had joined him in the offensive. He, like them, became a "man down." Gravely wounded, he could still gaze at the sun and the horizon, while the battle persisted, but the beauty of nature was interrupted by the piercing pain that he felt in his legs that were no longer legs.

In a moment of respite after that clash, he was hoisted onto a stretcher, and carried to a staging ground for the wounded. An American doctor, one could imagine, may have looked at the French nurse assisting him and shook his head. With that gesture, Ward would have understood that he was never again to see his home, his family, his mother, his siblings, or his youngest nephew, the infant Thomas, who was to be my father. Hopefully the staging ground medical personnel had something to give him to assuage his pain in those moments. He would cling to life for an entire week. Hopefully he uttered a prayer of repentance and offered his life for God and country before his final moment.

Approximately two years later, William Ward would finally be laid to rest in the Redemptorix Cemetery on the North Side of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, not far from where he had spent his entire childhood and adolescence. Some members of his family questioned what was actually in the sealed coffin dispatched from France but, collectively, they chose to treat it as his remains. There was a medallion that would follow, still standing at his gravesite, honoring his service.

My father later inherited the prayer book that was on William's person at the moment of his death. It was kept in the top drawer in my parents' bedroom. I frequently took it out and held it.

When I met our Church in Paris some 50 years later and finally came to understand the significance of its teachings and its Founders, I thought right away of William Ward and realized my debt to the young person for whom there is not a single photo and whom I knew only by his prayer book.

Nevertheless, hardly a day goes by when I do not think of him.