



HONORING THE WAR DEAD: AMERICA'S MILITARY CEMETERIES

By Kate Clarke Lemay and Jacqueline Whitt May 27, 2021
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Jacqueline Whitt: Hello and welcome to A Better Peace, the War Room podcast. I'm Jacqueline Whitt, Associate Professor of Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and the Editor in Chief of War Room. I'm so glad you've joined us for today's episode. Today we're going to explore an important but perhaps sobering topic, and it's one that matters to uniformed service members, veterans, citizens and the families and loved ones of those who have served and those who have died in service to their country. And that question or that topic today is how do states, and in this case we're going to think about the United States, memorialize war? And especially how do they commemorate and honor those who have died in war? So if we think about military cemeteries, Arlington National Cemetery just outside of Washington D.C. or the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific at Punch Bowl Crater outside of Honolulu, Hawaii, or the Normandy American Cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer, France, these are iconic reminders of the staggering human costs of war. And so here to help us think through and understand the significance of these sites, of memorialization, history and identity, I'm really happy to have in the virtual studio today, **Dr. Kate Clarke Lemay**, who is acting senior historian at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. Kate holds a PhD in art history and American studies from Indiana University and specializes in the intersections of art, memorialization and military and diplomatic history. She is the author of the book *Triumph of the Dead: American World War II Cemeteries, Monuments and Diplomacy in France*, which was published by the University of Alabama Press in 2018. The book explores the relationship between art, architecture, war, memory and Franco-American relations. It's also one of the most beautiful academic books I've ever seen, so I highly encourage you to check it out. Her research honors include an IIE Fulbright research grant and two grants from the Terra Foundation for American Art, and right now she is currently working on a new exhibit on the international history of the Wars of 1898, and I'm really excited to see what that turns out to be. So Kate, welcome to War Room.

Kate Clarke Lemay: Thank you. Thank you so much, Jackie.

JW: All right. So let's start with a really broad question, which is often where we start: Why are military cemeteries important sites for scholars of war, the military and society to even think about or to understand?

KCL: It's a good question and I like to start broad too. I like to think of the war cemeteries as a kind of window into the mid-century, but one with angled views. So depending on how you look, you can find histories of American art and architecture or histories of war and combat. But when you look farther, you might also have some insight into French and European war trauma, especially in Normandy. And even further, you may find some tangled politics of art patronage and culture wars about artistic style that circle back to the debates over how to best communicate memory of war. So the window is both birds eyed view but also expensive and there's a lot to absorb from these war cemeteries and studying them and understanding them.

JW: From a scholarly point of view, as an academic, how do you get started when you're thinking about war memorialization and the role cemeteries play? What would be your entry point in?

KCL: Well as an art historian, I always look at the object and so the entry point in is to just let my eyes absorb and look and see. And because the war cemeteries were planned as a large project with disparate parts with sculpture as well as headstones as well as monuments as well as landscape architecture—those are the individual components of the recipes, so to speak—but then there's this whole bigger idea that they feed into, which is to honor and remember American war dead. So depending on what catches your eye first, that's how you can approach these war cemeteries. And most non-academics, most people encounter these spaces through the headstones. The first thing that they see is what I think of as a landscape of death. There are endless rows of war graves, and it's a very impressive view. It's one of the most moving experiences a person can have is to walk into these American war cemeteries and sites and have that overwhelming vision before them of how many lives were lost during war.

JW: I think that certainly speaks to my experience of visiting different places because they're so orderly and they're all lined up and they stretch for so far and so many directions. It does seem to me to be this sort of dominant feature in some ways. You mentioned other aspects of sculpture and there might be maps and there are all sorts of other things. Can you talk a little bit about why those other elements are there?

KCL: They really are part of what in art history we think of as the Beaux-Arts. The Beaux-Arts is a French term for the beautiful arts.

JW: I try to learn something every day and it just happened.

KCL: It's spelled b-e-a-u-x and then the next word is arts, a-r-t-s. So the Beaux-Arts is a 19th century school of thinking developed in Paris of how to build spaces, so big works of architecture including sculpture and including landscape design, so the components were knit together as the pieces of the whole and the cemeteries emerged from this line of training. If you study who the architects of these individual sites were, all of them were trained in this way, in the Beaux-Arts training. So they're not going to just put out a cemetery and grid them together and put a marker on each grave. Instead, they're going to construct a whole system underground into which a 6-foot head stone is then rigidly placed into, and that's why those rows are so rigid because they have a system of architecture underneath the ground that holds them straight. They're also going to consider the ways in which the rows meet up not only in straight lines but in circles almost and sweeping diagonals. And also they're going to consider the main memorial and how that speaks back and forth to sculptures, funerary sculptures, and so the architecture and sculpture are hand in hand.

JW: Work together.

KCL: How it all works together. Yeah.

JW: So you said they're all sort of trained in this school. Can you tell us a little more about who is making these plans for American cemeteries overseas?

KCL: They were a very close-knit group of men, mostly male architects that emerged out of Penn, the University of Pennsylvania School of Architecture and were taught by a leading architect named Paul Cret. He was French so he trained in Paris. So there's a bit of a direct line of a very interrelated group and they were part of the same kinds of clubs like the National Sculpture Society in New York, the Century Club in New York. They were part of a group that, to borrow a phrase, sort of this good old boys club if you will. And it was hard to get this job actually, and so this is where if you dig into the history of the American War cemeteries and see who they were hiring, then you can start to see how certain types of style was preferred over others, and so certain architects got the job over others. And all of this of course was organized by the American Battle Monuments Commission, the ABMC, which is in existence to this day and that's the smallest agency of the executive branch of the federal government. So it's the United States government that's actually providing the financial support, taxpayers dollars, our taxes.

JW: And the American Battle Monuments Commission, the people who constitute it are making choices about who to hire as the architects, who to hire as the planners which results in the manifestation of specific ideas and specific like ways of thinking in the real world.

KCL: But they weren't going to hire just anybody. That's the catch. They needed to feel really confident that someone wasn't going to be too daring for the mid-century and go abstract, God forbid. So they wanted to make sure it was a figurative kind of sculptor.

JW: So they themselves have ideas about what war cemeteries and war memorials should be and then go and find the people who can execute that sort of idea and that vision. When were the American war cemeteries, especially in Europe, we were talking about mid-century, are they all built at about the same time?

KCL: Oddly enough, yes, in a weird way. So the war cemeteries overseas began after World War I. So the ABMC becomes a group and is activated in 1924 and this is some years after World War I ends. So it took some pivoting and some organizing to figure out, the best approach to creating war cemeteries for the United States in Europe. But they finally did, and so they started to activate the U.S. approach to war memory in 1924, but these sites actually didn't get constructed until 1936. So 1924 to 1936, and then of course, World War II happens and by this time around, ABMC had figured a lot of things out and so they were able to move more quickly after the war. But the war cemeteries designs didn't start until 1948, and then the construction didn't actually start until 1952. And it was completed by 1956. So you're looking at cemeteries that were conceived in the late 40s or in the late 20s and early 30s, and when I talk about the mid-century, that's what I'm referring to. And so the two groups, the World War I cemeteries and the World War II cemeteries are very similar actually if you break them down to design because they were made basically in the same period.

JW: At roughly the same time. Here comes one of the random questions that just popped into my head. We often think of burial and then interment as happening close to death, where people are buried soon after they die. Here we obviously have a big gap of years between the battle and the combat that takes place, soldiers dying, and the construction of these cemeteries and the burial sites and memorials. What happens in the interim between say a war and the dedication or the finalization of the cemetery?

KCL: I can only really speak to these two specific cases to the World Wars and what happens is that the American Graves Registration Service or the quartermaster came through and of course buried the dead. Not only American dead, but also the enemy. Many times you'll find in the archival sources—photographs, aerial photographs of the German War Cemetery and the American War Cemetery and they're separated by 200 feet—the fallen soldier is properly taken care of and buried and identified and that is very well tracked. The AGRS and quartermaster had this incredible system that they had been working on since the Civil War to do that so that system had been well perfected by the World Wars. What was new and different was design, high design of very articulate spaces and that took time. And so while these sites were being planned to make room for the appropriate landscape designs... land had to be graded according

to a certain degree for drainage, all these technical concerns that you don't even realize to go into this. But you can imagine how bad it would if things were to flood, say, in a cemetery. So it took years to do that, and in some cases, the temporary cemeteries were evacuated of the bodies and then those coffins which were sealed and airtight to U.S. military standards, they remained above ground covered by black tarp for years, and that was something that the U.S. government was very sensitive about and did not want to publish photographs of these coffins that were stacked above the ground.

JW: It's really interesting to think about the different purposes of grave registration, of immediate burial, of the needs of families and all sorts of things and then the impact that photographs of coffins lined up would have and the difference between that and rows of headstones. That's a pretty different image and a very different impact.

KCL: What was interesting for me in my research was to also look at the French experience of the temporary cemeteries. So I did a deeper dive in France in my research because I had to limit these cemeteries in some way to make it a little bit more feasible as a project. So I just focused on the ones in France which there were still 14 of them from World War I and World War II and what came across in a very striking way was how invested the Norman French, especially were in caretaking of the graves of the American war cemeteries while they were still temporary cemeteries. So there are only six if you count the permanent cemetery outside of Paris in Suresnes. There were only six permanent cemeteries that we know today from World War II that are in France. But originally there were 32 sites. So you can imagine all these little French villages that have these temporary American war cemeteries, and this is still during the era when travel and tourism hadn't yet revived in France. It was still a war-torn country. So the French were, I believe, and I argue that they were channeling some of their own war trauma through the caretaking of these American graves. Because if you think about it, often the French families in an area had lost their own person, but they didn't have a grave to tend to. So a lot of people have disappeared.

JW: So it's almost like proxy or something.

KCL: Yes, exactly. And I found that still moving when I kind of put that together. I thought that was a really important part of the war cemeteries' history.

JW: And I think you can still sort of feel that today. I had the privilege of being in Normandy at the 70th anniversary and that connection between France and the United States is palpable as you come across the anniversaries of D-Day and some other things and the pride with which the cemeteries are sort of understood and the place that they have there still seems pretty clear. I wonder if you have some thoughts about what we learn about the United States when we look at the way the U.S. has approached the question of memorializing its war dead, especially in the

two world wars that happened overseas where the casualties are for the Americans are quite high, not as high as other European combatants, of course, but these are fallen soldiers and sailors and marines and airmen who don't come home. What do we learn about the United States from looking at these places?

KCL: I have thought about this. I would say three things come to mind immediately. One is that the U.S. is a very wealthy nation. No other country was able to do this kind of in-depth design and move fallen soldiers around to the extent that we did in order to create these permanent designs. The designs are made out of... the art and architecture is often made out of very high-quality materials like marble. Artists were hired and this was an opportunity of a lifetime for them. They were paid very well, so that's one thing that we learned from these cemeteries, especially if you compare them to other nations from these World Wars, the cemeteries of their nations. So for example, Germany made its permanent war cemeteries in the 1960s after raising private funds because they were disbarred... they were not allowed to spend national money, federal money to pay for these war cemeteries because it might be construed as a form of nationalism. It's a very interesting long story and we can return to that if you would like. The second thing that I wanted to bring up about what we learn about the United States is that in the mid-century the U.S. American mid-century placed a value on collective group identity, rather than that of the individual. And then the third thing... and we can go back to that too... and the third thing is that the U.S. mastered a cultural diplomacy in a way that no other country could and really deployed cultural diplomacy through cemeteries, through these war cemeteries, through the messaging. So for example, after World War I, the demonstration of hey, we were here to, oh and by the way, we're willing to sacrifice. I think that that's the sort of secondary message behind that, and the same messages underscore the World War II cemeteries, that hey, should you decide to turn communist, we're willing to die for what we believe in by demonstration.

JW: It's a permanent marker in some ways of the cost that people have paid.

KCL: Of the costs that they've paid, but also of what we're willing to pay. It's a little bit of an implied statement of power.

JW: Sure. You started the podcast by saying as an art historian, you look first at the objects. Is there a specific object that you might tell us about in a little bit more detail that you think is particularly illustrative of either one of those three points, or is there something else that you'd like to leave with our listeners?

KCL: Sure. I think everyone can picture the head stone. So the head stone is either in the shape of the Latin Cross or of the Star of David. And on the headstone, the information that the U.S. American government chose to display is the name of the soldier, the state from which he, or if

it's a woman it's a nurse, she registered to enroll in military service and the actual branch and rank that that person served in. If you think okay, so there's a lot of information identifying this person, there's also the date of death. If you understand the war and the conflict, say if this person died on June 6th, 1944, you're like okay, that's D-Day. You get it. By contrast, the Commonwealth, so the British affiliated cemeteries, they have the age upon death as well and a personal kind of inscription of 60 letters that the families or the next of kin was allowed to personalize their headstone. They also have different religions that are allowed to be depicted or not depicted. If you just want to go with the Maple Leaf, that was the family's choice. You didn't have to have a Latin cross engraved in this rounded tombstone, headstone. But if you think in your mind and you can picture the American headstone versus these other countries' headstones, it's very clear that the U.S. was emphasizing a collective group. There's not enough information on that individual's headstone to really tell you much about the individual. But what you do know is this person fought in this battle. If you're a good enough military historian to know that and place that and most people aren't, so the date of death doesn't really help a lot of people or the branch, like if he was a signals officer, you can think about telephones and communications, maybe spying. I don't know. So there's a lot of information. It's kind of murky right for today's 21st century at least. But by contrast, if you go to these Commonwealth cemeteries, you're very moved by reading the inscription on a 19-year-old's headstone that says, we love you, we miss you, forever in our hearts, love, Mom, Dad and Sister. You're like, oh my God, this kid.

JW: Yeah. That's about a personal sort of connection to family and to country. For the American, the information on the American headstone is all tied to the state.

KCL: It's all tied to the state. It kind of just reveals too what the focus was in the mid-century versus the focus today and the ABMC has done a lot of work to try to invoke the individual behind that gravestone. It shows how the interests have shifted, but I really find it too bad that we didn't have those inscriptions and actually, for those of you who are familiar with the cemeteries and have been to the World War I cemeteries, and Suresnes or Oise-Aisne or Aisne-Marne, occasionally you will come across a headstone with an inscription at the back of the headstone. For about like a period of four months, the ABMC was allowing families to engrave inscriptions for American fallen soldiers, but they are under conditions. The families had to pay for it, so not all families could afford it and the other weird thing is that the families were choosing inscriptions that designated and assigned them a sense of class. So they would either quote scripture from somebody famous at the time that signaled a sort of waspy highbrow background. Or the other weird thing that they did was designate that the soldier had died in combat which is a big designation for World War I—like hey, my kid didn't die from the flu, he died in combat, killed in action. So that of course establishes a hierarchy of death.

JW: A marker of status. You've talked in a couple of places about things like religion or gender, which are categories that permeate our lives, but they also tell us complicated things about the

times and places that we live in. How do things like race or religion or gender or class and politics come into play in these spaces?

KCL: Well, that's kind of two things. One is that race and gender, and especially race for the time, that doesn't come into play. And that's thanks to John J. Pershing, who was the Secretary of the ABMC after World War I and he was the real mastermind of equality across the board that you see. Officers are not separated nor are the cemeteries segregated according to race. Women are less in the picture. They're also not segregated according to gender, there weren't that many of them. The families were the ones that chose to let their loved one remain in Europe, so many of those women were actually brought back. The other thing about religion is and this gets super complicated, but one of the things that I noticed is that in 1924, there was a group of Jewish Americans who organized and lobbied Congress to include in the headstone design the Star of David, and that demonstrates how well organized that group was at that time. And you don't see any other religion acknowledged except for Christianity and Jewish religions in the war cemeteries. So again, that kind of speaks to who had power in society at the time, but Native Americans or people of other faiths besides Christianity, they're all buried under a Latin cross, and I find that problematic today. In the mid-century, it wasn't, but that's one of the things that I think the ABMC is going to have to really address especially if it's a Japanese American group from Hawaii that's buried in Epinal. I would imagine that those families are uncomfortable with that grave marker, but I can't speak for them. But I would imagine that that kind of thing comes up.

JW: And it's a place where we see significant change over time. The religious markers in national cemeteries are much more expansive now than they were at mid-century. What's the obligation to go back and rectify or change decisions that were made in a specific time in a specific place. I think it's a really interesting question. I'm really sad to say that we're all out of time. Time always goes so quickly when I'm talking to interesting people about interesting things. So as today's podcast comes to a close, I would like to thank Dr. Kate Clarke Lemay once again for joining us today and I'd like to thank all of our listeners out there as well. Please send us your comments on this podcast or others, and we'd also love to hear your suggestions or ideas for future topics as well. We're always interested in hearing from you. If you've not already done so, I hope you'll subscribe to War Room via our website, which will put updates and content directly in your inbox, and you can also subscribe to A Better Peace on the podcatcher of your choice. And if you would, rate and review the podcast, that will certainly help other people find us as well. We look forward to having you all again with us soon, and until next time from the War Room, I'm Jackie Whitt.