Monday, May 31, 2004

Why we remember

Using World War I and Europe as her subjects, a UC prof's photos tell us about the meaning of memory

By John Johnston / The Cincinnati Enquirer

It began 90 years ago this summer, and festered into what was then the greatest war the world had seen.

Jane Alden Stevens, a University of Cincinnati Fine Arts professor, poses in front of her photo archives.
(Brandi Stafford/The Cincinnati Enquirer)

World War I exposed combatants to new horrors of armed conflict: howitzers that hurled shells and obliterated huge chunks of fortified trenches; poisonous gases that ravaged the lungs and blistered the body; flame-throwers that launched burning fuel.

By the time hostilities ended in 1918, Western Front countries had suffered staggering casualties. French dead, wounded or missing totaled more than 6 million; for Germany, the figure was more than 7 million; Great Britain, 3 million.

Memorial Day is an appropriate time to reflect on wars, past and present. And to ask: Do we remember?

It's the question Jane Alden Stevens sought to answer. The Clifton resident is 52, a married mother of almost 8-year-old twins, and a University of Cincinnati professor of fine arts.

The magnitude of World War I became apparent to her while on a visit to a tiny French village some years ago. She noticed an obelisk in the village square. The years 1914 through 1918 were inscribed on it, along with names of the war dead. Many were listed under 1914; even more for 1915 and 1916. But 1917 had far fewer names, and 1918 hardly any.

"There were no more men to send, no more men who could die," she says.

She thought about the hundreds, if not thousands, of other villages that suffered similar losses, and an idea percolated for a project to examine the persistence of memory. She wondered: Do people still remember and honor the sacrifices of a long-ago war? And if so, how does that memory manifest itself?

Stevens secured grant support from the Ohio Arts Council, UC and the English-Speaking Union. Then, over a two-year period beginning in 1999, she made five trips to World War I battlegrounds, memorials, cemeteries and landscapes in France, Belgium, Germany and Great Britain.

MEMORIAL DAY

• Photo gallery
• Veterans remember the ones still at war
• Ex-POW comforts Maupin family
• Veteran remembers liberating death camp
• Flag park salutes veterans
• Small towns bear heavy share of war dead
• Daugherty: Today is the day for our real heroes
• Why we remember

The photos she captured with black and white film, previously exhibited in galleries, are now featured in *Tears of Stone: World War I Remembered* ($65 hardcover; $35 softcover). The book includes a foreword by Donovan Webster, author of *Aftermath: The Remnants of War* (Vintage; $14), and essays by Stevens in English, French and German.

Paying tribute

World War I may have faded from the memory of most Americans, but not so in the countries where it was fought, Stevens says.

"I was actually surprised - perhaps shouldn't have been - that the memory is incredibly strong in Europe today. I met more people than I can count who were on pilgrimages ... to visit the war graves."

They ranged in age from schoolchildren to senior citizens. She chose not to photograph them.

"The project was not about the people who are mourning and paying their respects to the fallen soldiers. It was more about the evidence of that act of pilgrimage."

That evidence is moving.

At Brookwood Military Cemetery in England, she photographed a grave with this epitaph: "Sadly disfigured. Twas for the best. - Dad."

"The way I read that," Stevens says, "the soldier had come home, maimed. And had not had a happy life. How sad is that, that a father would feel it was best that his son passed away than live the life of a maimed person?"

At Vermandovillers German Military Cemetery in France, Stevens discovered a photo of an aviator; it was wrapped in plastic and wired onto a memorial. Condensation inside the plastic gave the impression of flowing tears.

Stories live in land

Although Stevens began the project by focusing on human-built monuments and memorials, she soon learned that landscapes also tell stories.

Farm fields that became battlefields remain scarred to this day. In the region around Verdun, France, where fighting claimed more than 1 million casualties, barbed wire borders thousands of acres where unexploded shells still pose hazards.

Combat was so fierce at the battle of Delville Wood, France, in 1916 that an entire forest was destroyed, save for one hornbeam tree. Although the woods have been replanted, and a memorial and museum have been built, pilgrims are drawn to the tree, as was Stevens.

"There are fissures where the tree swelled around the shrapnel to heal itself," she says. "The fissures are so deep that when pilgrims come they leave bric-a-brac and knickknacks and crosses in the

fissures, as well as at the base of the tree." The tree's bark had been worn smooth, from so many people touching it.

World War I was the catalyst for Stevens' project, but she says that for many people her photos have struck a chord that extends beyond that conflict. Perhaps it's because regardless of the war, or the time period, or the weapons used, memorialization has meaning. It's a way for those affected by war, directly and indirectly, to express their feelings.

Stevens says she has always honored Memorial Day and Veterans Day. But since taking on this project, she now makes a point around those holidays to bring her twins to Spring Grove Cemetery and Arboretum. They look at the decorated graves of veterans, talk about what it means. And they remember.

The book Tears of Stone can be purchased through Stevens' Web site, www.janealdenstevens.com.

E-mail jjohnston@enquirer.com