

An Engaging Remembrance

A Review of the American Battle Monuments Commission Website

Rachel A. Santose

Over 100,000 US military personnel died during World War I, with many of these deaths occurring directly on foreign battlefields. Public Law 389, enacted by the 66th Congress, as well as Public Law 360, enacted by the 80th Congress, allowed for a family's repatriation of soldier remains to the United States for burial in a national or private cemetery. In 1919, however, the US War Department decided to establish permanent American military cemeteries in Europe and offered this option as an alternative to repatriation. To persuade family members to consent, the War Department needed to ensure these cemeteries were impressive and significant symbols of the American sacrifice on foreign soil; therefore, the War Department detailed a group of Army officers to serve as the Battle Monuments Board in 1921.¹ Two years later, on March 4, 1923, Congress passed the Act for the Creation of an American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), which established one authoritative organization under Title 36 of the United States Code to control the construction of monuments and memorials to the American military in foreign countries.²

The ABMC was also established in response to the haphazard constructions of monuments on battlefields in Europe. A report filed in the House of Representatives on February 1, 1923, detailed the many problems resulting from the erection of inappropriate monuments across the European landscape. When American troops left Europe after the culmination of World War I, they left behind a series of monuments described by Secretary of War John W. Weeks as "mainly of temporary construction, with little architectural beauty."³ Furthermore, monument inscriptions were of doubtful historical accuracy and construction was completed without permission of the host country. As a result, the ABMC became the agency responsible for overseeing the construction of monuments in an organized, historically accurate, and professional manner.⁴

Today, the ABMC is responsible for the maintenance of twenty-five American cemeteries; twenty-six federal memorials,

monuments, and markers; as well as seven nonfederal memorials. These cemeteries and memorials honor Americans labeled as dead, missing in action, and lost or buried at sea where US armed forces have served since April 6, 1917, the date of America's entrance into World War I.⁵ Only three of the memorials are located in the United States, with the rest located in fourteen foreign countries. ABMC cemeteries most often contain the remains of those who gave the ultimate sacrifice during World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and Vietnam; however, ABMC is additionally responsible for the maintenance of cemeteries in Corozal, Panama, and Mexico City, Mexico, where American soldiers who fought in the American Civil War, Mexican War, and Spanish-American War are interred.⁶

The original mission of the agency has expanded to include a series of positive objectives. The ABMC explains, "Meticulously maintaining our memorials is our core mission, but that alone is no longer enough to honor our heroes."⁷ It is now the mission of the ABMC to "ensure physical access to the plot areas, memorials, visitor centers, and restroom facilities" at all sites.⁸ The importance of this initiative should be recognized, for many families and friends of those who fought and died in American foreign conflicts are recognizably less mobile. Another significant addition to the ABMC mission concerns the establishment of interpretation programs at ABMC cemeteries and memorial sites. The ABMC remains relevant through the development of exhibits that contextualize the history at overseas sites and analyze the values behind the warfare and death that occurred there.⁹ In fact, the ability to "Provide an inspirational and educational visitor experience through effective outreach and interpretive programs" is the agency's number one goal in their strategic plan.¹⁰ The development of interactive programs and virtual tours on the ABMC website, as well as interactive displays and exhibits within ABMC visitor centers, have improved the quality of communication, education, and inspiration for both visitors traveling to the cemeteries and memorials and viewing

the material on the Internet. Visiting these sites is often a once in a lifetime opportunity for Americans; therefore, it is important for the ABMC to recognize the significance of interpretive initiatives.

The ABMC is not free of issues and challenges. As time passes, so too do the generations of Americans who personally remember the conflicts of the twentieth century. Preservation of stories from those who have faulty memories or those who have already passed has become increasingly difficult. Furthermore, the demographics of those who visit ABMC sites are rapidly changing. Fewer visitors have personal ties to those interred in the cemeteries or whose names are listed on memorials; therefore, the ABMC must think of new techniques to market, attract, and educate a new generation of visitors. The ABMC believes that the “new” visitor demands higher expectations when visiting the sites, constantly holding the ABMC to “improve in order to maintain an exceptional standard.”¹¹

Another issue of the ABMC concerns the geographic distribution of the many cemeteries and memorials. Although it is a small and independent government agency, the ABMC is responsible for sites spread across fifteen countries. Sites are grouped into five geographic areas: World War II North, World War II South, World War I, Central America, and the Pacific, each with a regional director. Regional directors are held accountable by one of two offices, the ABMC headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, or the Overseas Operations Office in Garches, France.¹² This causes difficulties within the standardization of certain processes, including management, marketing, facility maintenance, and overall communication. One of the ABMC’s strategic goals is to ensure that efforts are adequately coordinated to illuminate the best opportunities for standardization in all practices.¹³ As the world advances into a digital and globalized age, the infrastructure of the ABMC must be adapted and improved to meet the needs and interests of a new generation while maintaining its commitment to serve the friends and families of servicemen who died overseas. After thorough examination of the agency’s website, the ABMC appears to be on its way to fulfilling all of these initiatives, especially through focus on public services, a robust database of ABMC burials, and historically accurate print and digital publications.

Public Services

The ABMC provides services for a variety of groups and individuals. On the most basic level, the agency is responsible for connecting friends and family members with the graves or names of fallen soldiers in foreign countries. The ABMC provides information on name, location (including plot, row, and grave or memorialization location), and general information

on all cemeteries under its jurisdiction. Also provided by the ABMC is travel information for those wishing to visit the cemeteries. The agency authorizes fee-free passports for members of immediate family members traveling to visit a grave or memorial site in a foreign country.¹⁴ The ABMC also offers a few fee-based services, including floral decoration services, lithograph creations, and Honor Roll Certificates. All services are clearly explained, complete with examples of photographs, lithographs, and certificates, on the agency’s website under Our Services on the About Us page.¹⁵ The ABMC understands that many Americans will never have the opportunity to pay their respects at foreign sites; therefore, the agency provides Americans, especially the descendants of interred relatives, with services that demonstrate appreciation for the sacrifices made in battle no matter the distance.

The ABMC also provides curriculum and lesson ideas for teachers, especially those in K–12 education. The website offers an entire section to this service, and details the agency’s collaborative efforts in educational programming, including participation in National History Day celebrations and major university partnerships. K–12 teachers can locate resources for their classrooms by browsing the page for Learning & Resources, or they may actively search for a resource using the website’s Filter & Find menu. In doing so, teachers may bring meaningful resources into the classroom to help students interact with the past in interdisciplinary and multi-modal ways.¹⁶

Cemetery and Memorial Database

The ABMC website offers a central database that organizes the names of soldiers who died overseas. Users may browse through the list of 224,290 records, or they may limit their search by name, conflict, branch of service, unit number, date of entry into the service, cemetery, or date of death. The databases only include records of those who are buried in ABMC cemeteries or who are listed on the Walls of the Missing at each site; however, the ABMC redirects users to visit the Department of Veterans Affairs to locate the names of those interred and memorialized in National Cemeteries on American soil.¹⁷

The ABMC once featured separate databases for soldiers killed in each conflict; however, the central database, with its ability to refine a search by conflict, is a much simpler construct. In this respect, the website has significantly improved from past years. On the other hand, the ABMC website once allowed users to search for soldiers from a specific state. This feature is no longer available, and is one criticism of the tool. Historians may have particular research questions that would benefit from a search by state, or lay individuals may want to know more about what happened to their neighbors during one of these conflicts.

Database search results are organized by name, branch, rank, conflict, and the cemetery in which the individual is interred. In the past, the database only included an abbreviation of the cemetery, which may have confused users. Also, the results now include branch of service, a feature that did not exist a few years ago. If the user clicks on a soldier's name, the database takes the user to a more detailed page with information on the soldier's unit, burial plot or inscription on a Tablet of the Missing, any awards they received, and a picture of the cemetery in which they are buried. To locate servicemen who died during the American Civil War, the Mexican War, and the Spanish-American War, the user must filter their search by Other under the choice of War or Conflict. In past years, the ABMC included these names as a list, separate from the databases and not easily navigated by a search. Now these men are as easy to locate as those who served in later conflicts. Overall, the ABMC database is easy to use and provides detailed and organized information about individual soldiers.

Publications

To meet one of the agency's traditional objectives, the production of reliable publications about the battle activities of American forces in Europe, the ABMC produces original print and digital works. Most publications are available as PDFs on the ABMC website; therefore, users can access resources at their convenience and search for specific words with their computer's find-in-page tool. The *ABMC Commemorative Sites Booklet* is one such publication and is the official publication of the agency. The *Booklet* provides information about all ABMC sites around the world. Unfortunately, the work is not easily located on the website. Users must navigate to the Learning & Resources tab and then select the box next to Publication on the left side of the page, or they must stumble across the work while visiting one of the cemetery pages.

Although not listed as official publications, a separate brochure and booklet for each site is also available online. All are modeled in the same format and include similar categories of information. These works are of high quality and include information about the cemetery as well as the battles that caused its existence. Each publication includes a map, or series of maps, that mark a cemetery's location in relation to the battles. This material is exceptionally helpful because it places the cemetery within the context of the overall battle or campaign. These publications also include a time line of historic dates and incorporate photographs of interesting statues, tablets, memorial gardens, and picturesque scenes. Statistical information is provided, such as the dimensions and dedication date of a particular cemetery or site, as well as the total number of headstones and the

number of men labeled Jewish, Christian, unknown, missing in action, or brothers. This statistical information greatly enhances the publications because it adds a sense of individuality to the deliberate uniformity of the rows of plain, white headstones.¹⁸

A variety of born-digital publications are featured on the ABMC website as well. These digital works fulfill the ABMC objective to produce viable historical information, and additionally accomplish the objective of improving qualities of communication, education, and inspiration for users. The Multimedia tab provides access to a series of YouTube videos concerning recent ABMC news, Memorial Day celebrations and monument dedications, as well as specific videos for each country associated with the ABMC. In addition, professional videos feature interviews with veterans and contain overviews of what visitors can expect to experience at ABMC sites. For instance, the website exhibits the movie shown daily at the Normandy Visitor Center, *Letters*. Through multimedia projects, the ABMC does an exemplary job of making those who cannot travel to foreign sites feel included in commemorations.¹⁹

The ABMC website also features a number of interactive sites and mobile applications for World War II campaigns surrounding the invasion of Normandy, American deployments in defense of Great Britain, and the path of Allied forces through Italy. Interactive ventures began in 2008 and 2009, with the ABMC production of an interactive site called *The Normandy Campaign: The Advance Inland*, and a later production, *The Battle of Pointe du Hoc, 6-8 June 1944: Interactive Combat Narrative*. Today, there are nine interactive sites and eight mobile applications available, all of which allow users to chronologically explore campaign operations and examine detailed maps and images for further comprehension.²⁰ The agency's increased development of multimedia and prioritization of interactive sites serve as great marketing and educational tools that engage new generations of visitors.

Summary of Findings

It must be noted that the ABMC website serves a diverse group of people. The site is simply laid out, which is likely intentional for ease of access for an older generation of users. Those who are not tech-savvy may easily navigate and access the site and its resources, while more experienced users and researchers can interact with a sophisticated search engine to locate resources and perform detailed searches for interred servicemen. After evaluation of the ABMC in general, as well as their website and publications, it may be argued that the ABMC provides a valuable, but often overlooked, service to the American public. Although there is no official data to support this argument, the fact that the ABMC acknowledges many struggles to appeal to

today's changing demographics points to that perception. The agency's jurisdiction over foreign sites may be cause for past public ignorance; however, the ABMC unfailingly attempts to appeal to the ever-increasing diversity of the American population through fulfillment of both traditional and new-generation oriented objectives. Although forward thinking, the agency does not fail to acknowledge its continued commitment to the older generations of Americans who personally lost friends and family members in American overseas conflicts. These generations are slowly beginning to age and become less mobile. Therefore, the ABMC does its due diligence to reach a balance between the old and the new, the traditional and the digital, and between reality and the virtual. As the world globalizes, government agencies, as well as cultural sites, may wish to imitate the ABMC model. Ultimately, the ABMC's agency website is an effective source for delivering online government information to researchers and the American public alike.

Rachel A. Santose (santoser@canton.edu) is Instruction and Assessment Librarian, SUNY Canton College of Technology.

References

1. Elizabeth G. Grossman, "Architect for a Public Client: The Monuments and Chapels of the American Battle Monuments Commission," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 43, no. 2 (1984): 122.
2. *An Act for the Creation of an American Battle Monuments Commission*, Public Law 546, *U.S. Code* 36 (1923), § 2103.
3. Committee on the Whole House, *To Create an American Battle Monuments Commission*, 67th Cong., 2d sess., 1923, H. Rep. 1504, 2.
4. John F. Harbeson, "A Collaborative Undertaking," *American Institute of Architects Journal* 36 (1961): 35.
5. "History," American Battle Monuments Commission, accessed April 20, 2015, www.abmc.gov/about-us/history.
6. *Ibid.*
7. American Battle Monuments Commission, *American Battle Monuments Commission: FY 2010-2015 Strategic Plan* (Washington DC, 2009): 9.
8. House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, *Rep. John Runyan Holds a Hearing on National Cemeteries Update*, 112th Cong., 2d sess., 2012, 11.
9. *Ibid.*, 12.
10. ABMC, *American Battle Monuments Commission: FY 2010-2015 Strategic Plan* (Washington DC, 2009): 9.
11. *Ibid.*, 11.
12. *Ibid.*, 7, 16.
13. *Ibid.*
14. "Our Services," American Battle Monuments Commission, accessed April 20, 2015, www.abmc.gov/about-us/our-services.
15. *Ibid.*
16. "Learning & Resources," American Battle Monuments Commission, accessed April 20, 2015, www.abmc.gov/learning-resources.
17. "FAQ's," American Battle Monuments Commission, accessed April 20, 2015, www.abmc.gov/about-us/faqs.
18. It should be noted that most of this information is further compiled and published in a reference book titled *American Battle Monuments: A Guide to Military Cemeteries and Monuments Maintained by the American Battle Monuments Commission*. In addition, the American Battle Monuments Commission (AMBC) published a number of works not available on the agency's website. For instance, the ABMC released a series of twenty-eight divisional histories in 1944, one for each Army division that fought on the Western Front during World War I. Each history describes a division's arrival in France and the training received by its members, and the following chapters focus on specific operations performed by each division.
19. "Multimedia," American Battle Monuments Commission, accessed April 20, 2015, www.abmc.gov/multimedia.
20. *Ibid.*