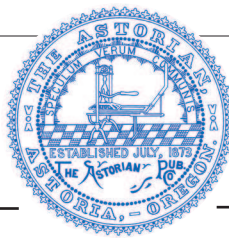


OPINION

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Associated Press

A U.S. Army 37mm gun crew mans its position during the Meuse-Argonne offensive in France in September 1918. The battle cost 26,000 American lives, but helped bring about the end of World War I.

Imagining the Great War, a century later

There are competing schools of thought as to the inspiration for J.R.R. Tolkien's visions of Mordor in his epic fantasy trilogy, *Lord of the Rings*.

Some say it was the steelworks and blast furnaces of the industrialized West Midlands northwest of Birmingham, England. But

many others — including myself — believe Tolkien's memories of his British Army service in the horrific World War I battle of the Somme were the real catalyst. The British suffered 57,000 casualties on the first day of the battle alone.

The campaign would claim almost 1.5 million Allied soldiers, including the lives of two of his closest friends and another shortly afterward.

Several passages in the novels evoke echoes of the blasted moonscapes of northern France — the muddy trenches, the widespread pestilence, the barbed wire, the deadly clouds of poisonous gas, the enemy siege works, and death and destruction on an unimaginable scale.

For example, as Frodo and Sam cross the Dead Marshes in *The Two Towers*, they see the faces of the dead below the water. "Grim faces and evil, and noble faces and sad. Many faces proud and fair, and weeds in their silver hair. But all foul, all rotting, all dead."

Sunday marks the 100th anniversary of the Armistice ending the war. Memories of one of the most cataclysmic events in world history have mostly faded from the public consciousness, as the generation who fought in it has passed. It is left to their children and grandchildren to preserve the accounts of their sacrifices.

As recounted by reporter Edward Stratton in today's newspaper, Clatsop County residents served the war effort both overseas and at home. The Doughboy Monument in Astoria is the most visible tribute to their contributions.

Fittingly, a memorial service is planned for 11 a.m. Sunday at the monument, marking the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month. Bells will ring around the city. A 1 p.m. event in the Astoria Public Library's flag room will include the reading of the names of 34 county residents who died in the war.

Before Nov. 11, the war had killed 14 million people over four years, including 9 million soldiers, sailors and airmen from 28 countries, according to the Associated Press. Almost 11,000 died on the final morning, many in the final minutes.

"Hurrah!! Hurrah!!!" local Army veteran William Carl Urell's diary from Nov. 11, 1918, reads. "The war is over at last. Hurrah!!!!!"

Walking on hallowed ground

As a young lieutenant serving in the Army's 1st Infantry Division, I had the opportunity in the 1980s to tour several of the battlefields in France on which American soldiers fought — Cantigny, Soissons, St. Mihiel and the Meuse-Argonne.

At first, it's hard to imagine the scenes recounted in diaries and official unit histories, and depicted in grainy black-and-white photos from that era. The Argonne countryside is a verdant and idyllic place today, full of lush farms, lakes, thick forests and



Associated Press

American troops near St. Mihiel, France, cheer after hearing the news that the Armistice was signed ending World War I.



AP Photo/Thibault Camus

Men in World War I military uniforms pose in the Meuse-Argonne cemetery during a remembrance ceremony Sept. 23, 2018.

picturesque villages.

Then, driving through the region, the reminders appear. The vast cemeteries full of crosses. The mass graves marked by towering monuments. The overgrown outlines of vast trenchworks and machine-gun emplacements.

The 1918 Meuse-Argonne offensive, which ended the war, involved 1.2 million American troops and was a particularly brutal affair, even by the standards of the

day. Fresh, inexperienced, eager soldiers were thrown headlong into frontal assaults against machine guns manned by seasoned German troops in densely wooded terrain. Much of the combat devolved into close-range fighting with pistols, bayonets and knives.

I thought to myself at the time how fortunate my grandfather was to have served on a Navy ship during the war, not on the front lines in that hellish fray.

The most haunting memory of the trip is of the "Trench of the Bayonets" near Verdun. In 1916, a company of the French 137th Regiment defending Fort Douaumont was annihilated almost to the last man when a German artillery barrage collapsed the walls of their earthworks.

They were found with a neat line of bayonets sticking out of the ground, still attached to their rifles, a body buried next to each one. The site has been preserved nearly intact.

War story wrapped in fantasy

Tolkien, a young Oxford academic, was 24 when he arrived at the Somme that same year. He began writing the first drafts of his mythology about Middle-earth, as he recalled, "by candle light in bell-tents, even some down in dugouts under shell fire," according to Joseph Loconte, an associate professor of history at the King's College in New York.

"When Frodo returns to the Shire, his quest at an end, he resembles not so much the conquering hero as a shellshocked veteran," Loconte wrote in the *New York Times* in 2016. "Here is a war story, wrapped in fantasy, that delivers painful truths about the human predicament."

"Tolkien used the language of myth not to escape the world, but to reveal a mythic and heroic quality in the world as we find it," he added. "Perhaps this was the greatest tribute he could pay to the fallen of the Somme."

Jim Van Nostrand is editor of The Daily Astorian.