In June of 2004, an enthusiastic group of History majors led by Dr. Steve Bourque embarked on a two-week journey across Western Europe, retracing the steps of WWI soldiers. The group landed in Brussels, Belgium on June 15 and headed for Liege. The next morning they launched into the learning experience of a lifetime and over the next thirteen days became immersed in WWI. They studied the battlefields, monuments, cemeteries, soldiers and civilians of the war. On that first day, the class traveled to Köln, Germany for the day to study the Schlieffen Plan and the German way of war. After having lunch on the Rhine and stopping in Aachen to view the tomb of Charlemagne, the group headed back to Belgium.

Each participant in the journey researched a specific topic or battle of the war and presented their findings to the entire class at the site where it actually occurred. The student presentations often took place at sites nearly as dramatic as the events that had taken place there. Huge mortar craters, fortresses, trenches and windswept bluffs all served as backdrops for the presentations. The second day of study consisted of the German siege on Liege when the Germans violated Belgian neutrality in accordance with the Schlieffen Plan. Jon Eckel educated the class about the siege from the German perspective, “It was cool to finally see the place that I had been researching for so long.”

After spending three nights in Liege, the travelers headed off to their next destination, Lille, France. A quick sidetrip to Waterloo on the way proved to be very rewarding. “The great thing about studying history in Europe is that there is layered history all around us, it is impossible to travel around studying WWI without running into monuments and such from other eras in European history,” Dr. Bourque explained.

From Lille, the group traveled each day to a new site including Ypres, Passchendaele, the Somme and Vimy Ridge. There were many museums dedicated to the daily topics the students were studying. Some were simply massive personal collections of WWI artifacts found in the surrounding countryside, such as the case in Ypres. Meanwhile, other museums contained magnificent displays and a plethora of information, as was the case with the Musée du Grand Guerre in Peronne, France.

Mike Lloyd and Manuel Menchaca presented their topics at the battle of the
Great War: WWI

Marchers at the Saisson battlefield in pristine countryside, site of the first multi-division U.S. attack. Left to right: Mike Loyd, John Eckel, Casey Martin, Lara Landry, Pat Devine.

Somme, which resulted in a particularly devastating loss of life. Throughout the voyage across northern France and Belgium, the class encountered innumerable cemeteries and monuments to the missing soldiers. These sites affected each person differently. For Manuel Menchaca, “the grave of each soldier speaks to us and although we cannot change what went before, each of us learned that we can and should strive for positive change in our current affairs.”

After a four night stay in Lille, the group arrived at the final destination for the trip in Reims, France. They took an additional sidetrip to Agincourt, the site of a battle in which England defeated France in the year 1415, yet another example of layered history.

From Reims, the class continued to take daily trips to sites of study, such as Verdun, a battle of attrition that lasted for ten months and cost over 700,000 lives. The following day the class visited Chemin de Dames and discussed why the French Army mutinied in 1917.

Next on the agenda was a study of the American involvement in WWI. The students walked in the footsteps of the American Marines on the road to Belleau Wood. The class then explored the Meuse-Argonne, site of the largest American offensive of the war.

For the grand finale of this unforgettable expedition across Northern France and Belgium, the group concluded their in-depth studies at the Aisne-Marne American cemetery. They had the honor of raising the American flags over the countless rows of white marble crosses in the morning dew. As the American National Anthem echoed through the cemetery, each person reflected on what they had experienced over the last two weeks and felt a connection to the soldiers buried beneath those white crosses.

Participants

Dr. Stephen Bourque
Ashot Avakian
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Jacob Baldridge
Amie Brodhagen
David Dee
Patrick Devine
Jon Eckel
Dustin Fults
Jennifer Garrett
Maryanna Gray
Autumn Hayner
Daniella Hovsepian
Kristi Huggins
Lee Jensen
Allison Kale
Jarrod Kellogg
Lara Landry
Jessica Little
David Livingstone
Mike Loyd
Sylva Markarian
Casey Martin
Megan McDonald
Manuel Menchaca
Nick Mendoza
Tony Nixon
Heather Pennella
Bryan Sanders
Michelle Sass
Robert Shafer
Mark Thrift
Andy Vega
Erika Venable

Presentation on the Somme battlefield on the German trench lines. The British position is in the treeline.