

Remember Frank Buckles, the Last Doughboy of World War I

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Last weekend, America lost its sole surviving “doughboy” of World War I, Frank Buckles. His death marks a poignant moment in our nation’s history. With his passing, our direct and living connection to the Great War is now gone, leaving only artifacts, images, memorials, and words to link us to the “War to End All Wars” and to the nearly 4.5 million men who wore the American uniform in that conflict.

The First World War was the first chapter in the history of the modern era. Its generation—the first generation of men at war to witness fully mechanized battle—came of age in the face of machine guns, tanks, and gas that killed hundreds of thousands and disabled, disfigured, and traumatized hundreds of thousands more. Members of the so-called “generation of 1914” witnessed unprecedented horrors of war, and some lived to see another world war and wars beyond that.

The World War I generation created ideas and language that are still in use. When Americans describe the ongoing political battles over abortion rights as “trench warfare,” the terrain after a natural disaster as “no man’s land,” and the victims of hurricanes as “shell-shocked,” we are using descriptions that have their origin in the generation that—with the passing of Frank Buckles—has now left leave us entirely. Indeed, we are now almost as far removed from the Marne as the Marne was from Waterloo.

The World War I generation also witnessed a public health tragedy. The 1918 flu outbreak was the worst epidemic in American history, killing more than 675,000 Americans and tens of millions worldwide. We were unprepared then to deal with such a crisis, and we are, according to some, unprepared now.

The World War I generation witnessed medical innovation. On the battlefield, wounded American soldiers benefited from doctors adopting the World War I French system of triage, the sorting casualties according to the severity of wounds and their need for surgical treatment. At Walter Reed and other hospitals around the country, soldiers disabled in battle received artificial limbs and braces as part of physical reconstruction programs that involved education classes and rehabilitation workshops. Since the war, triage has become a standard practice in emergency

medicine. Cultivated in war, the specialized fields of orthotics, prosthetics, physical therapy, and occupational therapy have become essential to the rehabilitation of soldiers and civilians alike. Today in military medical centers located around the country the rehabilitation of men and women wounded in war continues.

For most Americans, Veterans Day is the most enduring legacy of World War I and its generation. It originated as “Armistice Day” on November 11, 1918, with the purpose of commemorating the end of the conflict. The news about the passing of Frank Buckles anticipates Veterans Day 2011 holding even more significance as America observes the occasion born from the Great War without its last direct connection to that period of history. More immediately, the historic news of Frank Buckles’s death should give us pause to appreciate and better understand an era—and a generation of individuals—too often forgotten here in the United States.

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