David Breen and Cyndi Skripak visit the Meuse-Argonne region to retrace Edward L. Breen, Sr.’s WWI experience

July 6 – 8, 2018
From July 6th to 8th, 2018, my wife (Cyndi Skripak) and I travelled to the Verdun area of Northeast France in order retrace the steps of my grandfather’s (Edward L. Breen, Sr.) combat experience during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in September to November of 1918.

My grandfather was a 1st lieutenant in the 52nd Pioneer Infantry, assigned to the American Expeditionary Forces’ 1st Army, Vth Corps.
Edward L. Breen, Sr., 1918
Edward L. Breen, Sr.
Twenty years later?
David E. Breen and Edward L. Breen, Sr., 1978
My grandfather regularly told stories about his experiences in France during World War I.

Many years later I was amazed to realize that the total time that he was involved in combat in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive was only about 7 weeks. He was still talking about those 7 weeks of his life 50 years later!

One story he told of a fellow soldier who wrote home to tell his girlfriend that he had slept beside Big Bertha. She wrote back and broke up with him because of his infidelities.

But Big Bertha was not a French country maiden, but the name given to the huge cannons used by the Germans to shell the Allies. The Americans had overrun a German artillery position.
My grandfather spoke with great admiration of the French soldiers that he fought beside. He told me how the French had stopped the Germans at Verdun. According to my grandfather, the general who commanded the troops of Verdun motivated and inspired them with the words “They shall not pass!”.

Verdun was never taken by the German army.

On top of a hill (aptly called Dead-Man’s Hill (Le Mort-Homme)) outside of Verdun there is a chilling monument that declares “They did not pass” (Ils n’ont pas passe’).
Le Mort-Homme Monument
There was a song that my grandfather would sing from his WWI days about hanging the Kaiser from a linden tree.

When I was eight or nine listening to him merrily sing this song, I had no idea what a Kaiser or a linden tree was.

A google search quickly led to the song that he would sing.
WE'RE GOING TO HANG THE KAISER
UNDER THE LINDEN TREE

By
KENDIS AND BROCKMAN

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New York
At the start of the First World War in August 1914 the Germans swept through neutral Belgium into northern France in an attempt to capture Paris and quickly end the war.

The French and British repulsed the Germans and a 4-year stalemate of trench warfare followed.

Note the salient around Verdun in the East in the following map.
After Germany resumed unlimited submarine warfare, and sank several American merchant ships, and approached Mexico to side with them in the war, the United States declared war against Germany on April 6, 1917.

What followed was a gargantuan effort to create a 4 million man army. At the time of the war declaration the US had a standing army of 127,500 soldiers.

A substantial number of US troops were not sent to France until January 1918.

They were not involved in significant combat until May and June of 1918. Their major action was in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive from September 26 to November 11, 1918.
Edward Breen arrived in France August 11, 1918.
By 9/25/1918 his unit was at Avocourt, a small French village on the front lines between the Americans and the Germans.
The Meuse-Argonne offensive began on September 26th.
The first stop on our trip, after our first night in Verdun, was the lovely village of Avocourt.
American-German Frontline September 1918
Take note of this monument in front of the church at Avocourt
Bas-relief on a wall of a home in Avocourt
View across a field (no-mans land) to German positions from Avocourt cemetery
View to Avocourt from cemetery
View from outskirts of town towards German positions
Sketch of battlefield done by fellow 52nd Pioneer Infantry lieutenant John Mallard

Panoramic view of a bit of the ground the boys covered
Avocourt 1917

Note the monument
6. L'ARGONNE — Ruines d'Avocourt
More destruction as time goes on!
By the time the Americans got to Avocourt, there was nothing left of the village. Only the cross had survived!
THE AVOCOURT-MALANCOURT ROAD (SECTION TOWARD AVOCOURT)

This road once led through a dense woods but the ravages of four years of intermittent artillery fire are plainly apparent.
The woods grew back
The objective of the AEF’s 1st Army, Vth Corps was Montfaucon, a heavily fortified hill just a few miles away from Avocourt.

From Avocourt, we traveled the Avacourt-Malancourt Road, which would have been through the no-mans land between the American and German positions, to Montfaucon.
Montfaucon hill with American monument
Montfaucon is one of many French “destroyed villages” (villages détruits) that were obliterated during WWI.
The monument “commemorates the American victory during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive”

At the site of one of the most difficult engagements of the offensive.
The Germans turned the ruins of the Montfaucon Cathedral into an observation bunker.
Next stop: M.-A. American Cemetery
14,246 graves
Chapel
THIS CHAPEL
IS ERECTED BY THE
UNITED STATES OF
AMERICA AS A SACRED
RENDEZVOUS OF A
GRATEFUL PEOPLE WITH
ITS IMMORTAL DEAD
Two Westfielders who did not return home.
A memorial to the 315th Infantry Regiment in Nantillois
ERECTED IN MEMORY OF THE GLO-RIOUS DEAD OF THE 315TH INFANTRY U.S.A.
The Pennsylvania Memorial in Varennes
IN HONOR OF HER TROOPS WHO SERVED IN THE GREAT WAR
AMONG WHOM WERE THE LIBERATORS OF VARENNES 1918
AND IN GRATEFUL APPRECIATION OF THEIR SERVICE
THIS MEMORIAL IS ERECTED BY THE STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA
1927
Stopping for lunch
Cheppy was one of many towns that the 52nd Pioneers passed through.
A well-preserved area of German trenches, bunkers and underground rail supply lines(!!) just on the other side of the American positions.
One of the remarkable things we discovered in our travels was the use of underground explosive mines during WWI. Both French and German soldiers would tunnel under enemy lines and detonate massive amounts of explosives, killing many soldiers and leaving deep, gaping mine craters.

We saw many of these in the Forêt Domaniale de Haute Chevauchée in the Argonne Forrest.
This is the crater left by what is supposed to be the largest single mine explosion of the war.

In the background is the Memorial to the Defenders of the Argonne. It sits over an ossuary containing the bones of several thousand unknown soldiers.
Next stop: Butte de Vauquois

A major site of German-French mine warfare.

A hill outside of Verdun where 519 underground explosions (along with other warfare) killed about 14,000 soldiers between 1915 and 1918.

There once was a village here. All that is left are trenches, tunnels and craters.
Many miles of tunnels were dug into this small hill, where German and French soldiers were separated from each other by just a few yards.
Last stop was the marker pointing to the ravine where the “Lost Battalion” (554 soldiers of the US 77th Division) was surrounded by Germans in the Argonne Forest.

After 6 days of battle and bombardments, 157 surviving soldiers were rescued by other battalions of the 77th Division.
After an intense day, we drove back to Verdun past the Verdun Citadel.

This is a memorial to the French WWI soldiers of Verdun, outside the citadel.

We did not visit the citadel. Have to do that during the next trip!
That night we had dinner at a lovely restaurant along the Meuse River.
Here I am “enjoying” a local specialty, a gamey sausage made from parts of an animal I never want to eat again!
We then joined the locals as we cheered for the French soccer team on their way to winning the World Cup!
The next day, on our way out of Verdun we stopped at the Douaumont Ossuary and Cemetery. This macabre memorial contains the bones of approximately 130,000(!) unidentified French and German soldiers.

230,000 soldiers were killed in the 300-day Battle of Verdun in 1916. A staggering, incomprehensible number.
Once I returned to the US, I wanted to retrace some of my grandfather’s roots in New Jersey. I found his name on a plaque in the Metuchen (NJ) Memorial Park, which honors the veterans of Metuchen. His name (Edward L. Breen) is there with his brother’s (William) and cousin’s (James).
IN HONOR OF THE MEN OF THE BOROUGH OF METUCHEN WHO WITH GREAT DEVOTION RESPONDED TO THEIR COUNTRY'S CALL DEDICATING THEMSELVES UNRESERVEDLY TO THE END THAT OUR RIGHTS AS A NATION SHOULD BE FEARLESSLY MAINTAINED AND TO THE ETERNAL MEMORY OF PRANK HUMMER HARRY HANSON CONKLIN SMITH EDWARD FUGLB THE TABLET IS ERECTED TO THE FLOWER OF OUR YOUNG MANHOOD BY THE CITIZENS OF THE BOROUGH OF METUCHEN
Edward’s final resting place in St. Gertrude Cemetery in Colonia, NJ.

Next to his wife Frances.

Note that I have census records that show that Frances was born in November 1887.

I have no idea why the gravestone says that she was born in 1902.
Epilogue

As you drive around the countryside outside of Verdun you regularly see signs “Terrain Militaire, Defense D’entrer” (Military Ground, No Admittance) in the bucolic fields of grasses and wildflowers. I imagine that access to these fields is restricted because of unexploded WWI munitions?
TERRAIN MILITAIRE
DÉFENSE D’ENTRER
Articles 413-5 et R644-1
du code pénal
In Flanders Fields
By John McCrae

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.