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# Descendants of WWI vets remember their sacrifice

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**📷 STEVEN M. FALK/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**

Veterans from American Legion Post No. 901 (from left) David Tomlinson, Joe Patti, Paul Candelori, and J. Robert Wagner salute during the national anthem.

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by **Dan Geringer**, Staff Writer

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Some died in 1918 on a French battlefield. Some returned home to eastern Pennsylvania. But all the men of the American Expeditionary Forces' 314th Infantry, 79th Division, who fought in World War I's bloody Meuse-Argonne Offensive, are gone now.



**Descendants of WWI vets remember their sacrifice**  
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The memory of their courage and their sacrifice, kept alive since the Great War's end - first by the veterans themselves, then by the Descendants and Friends of the 314th - was honored Sunday at the Washington Memorial Chapel in Valley Forge National Historical Park.

"Immediately after the war, our ancestors decided on the ship home from France to start an organization to honor the 362 men from the 314th who died on the battlefield," said Nancy Schaff, the group's president. "This will be our 98th year of holding this annual service."

All of the chapel's pews were filled for the memorial program, which included a Color Guard presented by the veterans of American Legion Post No. 901 in Jeffersonville. The day included a display of 79th Division artifacts from World War

I, and a talk by historian William T. Walker, whose new book, *Betrayal at Little Gibraltar*, focuses on the Meuse-Argonne Offensive.

The Color Guard included Joe Patti, 78, whose father, Antonio Patti, a 314th infantryman, lost his left arm in combat.

Joe Patti was momentarily overcome with emotion as he remembered the many childhood years his father took him to 314th memorial services at Valley Forge. He said he marches in the Color Guard to honor his father and all the men who fought with him.

Outside the chapel, Marc Hermann, 34, was decked out as a World War I infantryman, complete with a .30-caliber rifle, a gas mask, and rations of corned beef, hard crackers, and coffee sealed in tin containers to protect them from poison gas attacks.

"We no longer have any living veterans from World War I in the United States," said Schaff, who traveled to the memorial from her home in Rising Sun, Md. "And we don't want memories of World War I veterans to be diminished because the veterans are no longer alive.

"My husband was in the Army for 30 years," she said, "and when you're in the military, there is a great sense of tradition and respect for those who have come before you. Many members of our organization are direct descendants of the 314th."

Schaff's grandfather, John Blazosky, was a corporal in the 314th. He was wounded twice during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, where there were 117,000 American casualties in what Schaff called "the bloodiest battle of the war."

She said her grandfather, who was from Port Matilda near State College, was "a coal miner during the week, and a farmer on weekends. He was maybe 5-foot-2, but he had that strong Pennsylvania grit."

Schaff said all the men of the 314th had the indomitable spirit to strike an Imperial German Army stronghold that was considered impregnable. "Against all odds, they held themselves together in the war," she said.

Joel Rentz, who grew up in Reading and came to the memorial from his home in Florida, said his grandfather Irwin Rentz also served with the 314th.

"My grandfather used to bring me to these things when I was a little kid," Rentz said. "There used to be a couple of World War I artillery pieces here, and I remember sitting in the artillery seat, watching my grandfather and all of his buddies talking. My father was also a veteran and very involved in this organization. So this service is kind of in my DNA."

Rentz's grandfather was a scout for the 314th in France. "The scouts would go on the other side of no-man's land," Rentz said, "roving the enemy trenches at night, cutting the barbed wire, capturing German soldiers, and bringing them back to get intelligence information. It was very high-risk.

"I understand why my grandfather never talked about his days in World War I," Rentz said. "We'd go to Valley Forge together, but as far as discussing specifically what he did in the war, he didn't talk about that."

One thing both Rentz's and Schaff's grandfathers did talk about was the log cabin that the men of the 314th built in 1917 as an assembly room and officers' club when they trained at Camp Meade in Maryland before going off to fight in World War I.

After the war, the 314th veterans chipped in to buy the cabin from the U.S. government, deconstruct it, ship it to Valley Forge, and reconstruct it in 1922 on hallowed ground near the Washington Memorial Chapel, where it housed a large collection of World War I memorabilia and was dedicated to the 362 soldiers of the 314th who died in France. "They put all of their personal mementos into it," Schaff said.

A bronze plaque listed all the members of the 314th. A star marked the name of each soldier who had died.

Ray-Jude Paski, who comes from a military family and was wearing his Civil Air Patrol uniform Sunday, recalled reenacting the role of a World War I infantryman in the cabin on weekends during the '90s, interpreting the history of the 314th for Valley Forge visitors, keeping the memory alive.

His two sons, Matthew, 24, and R.J. Jr., 23, who now serve in the military, would help him clean the cabin's artifacts. Both sons, Paski said proudly, carried rifles and marched in the Color Guard at 314th memorial services for several years.

The Descendants and Friends of the 314th had the cabin deconstructed again in 2012 in hopes of bringing it home to Fort Meade and opening it as a public memorial by April 6, 2017, the 100th anniversary of the United States entering World War I.

"To get that cabin reopened in Fort Meade," Rentz said, "and to get that plaque back in the cabin where people can visit it and remember what these guys did and what a whole lot of other guys like these guys did, that's our goal here. That's our dream."

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