

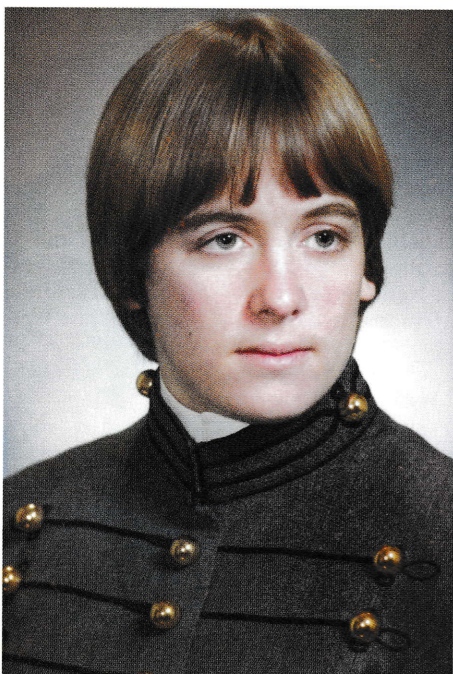
An Exceptional Woman*

One would expect something special from a woman whose email address includes the name 'Wild Woman' and Lillian Pfluke genuinely fits the bill.

We first made contact with Lil (as she is generally known), when she worked for the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) as Private Memorials Administrator in their Paris office, when we had queries about American memorials we were coming across – especially for our Americans Sectors in our Western Front – South book. She was unfailingly helpful with information and advice and over the years we have become firm friends.

The ABMC was formed in 1923, when President Harding signed the legislation on 4 March. Its aim was to provide 'suitable memorial shrines' and the 'designing, constructing and maintaining permanent American burial grounds in foreign countries'. General John Pershing was elected first Chairman of the Commission and he served in that capacity from 1923 until his death in 1948. President Trump appointed his senior 2016 campaign adviser, David John Urban, as the eleventh chairman of ABMC in July 2018. Urban had served with the 101st Airborne from 1986-1997 and was awarded the Bronze Star for his achievements in Desert Storm.

Before her work with the Commission, Lil had graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1980, in the first class that included women. She had been educated as a mechanical engineer and was commissioned into the US Army Ordnance Corps. Her Army career was spent running mechanical maintenance facilities and developing space and missile weapon systems. She retired as a Major in 1995 and moved to Paris, hence her 10 years of work with ABMC. The experience she acquired in



West Point Graduate, Lillian Pfluke, 1980.

this job convinced her that the only viable solution for the long-term preservation of American private memorials overseas was a non-profit organisation, similar to the CWGC and the French *Services des Sépultures de Guerre*.

As a result, Lil, still living in Paris, founded the **American War Memorials Overseas** in 2008 as 'a non-profit corporation, working to document, promote, and preserve non-government-supported War Memorials honoring Americans outside of the United States'. There are well over one thousand different memorial sites worldwide. These include:

- Hundreds of monuments, markers, and plaques on the fields where Americans fought worldwide.
- Close to one thousand Americans buried in foreign soil outside of America's overseas military cemeteries.
- Hundreds of American combat vehicles on display internationally.
- Scores of museums in foreign towns that proudly recount and honor America's overseas wartime contributions.

In most cases, neither the United States government, nor local governments, have the responsibility or the resources to document and maintain these sites.

Lil's commitment to the cause is outstanding. She explains, "Sometimes people ask me how I can be so devoted to a mission so centered on death. That question misses the whole point of what we are trying to do when we remember the dead and their sacrifices. Every headstone in a military cemetery, every monument by the side of a road, every plaque honoring a soldier in a small town, every name inscribed on a village monument, all of these don't signify death, but signify what those deaths have accomplished. Every memorial is a celebration of the freedoms we enjoy, of the mutual sacrifices and struggles endured to achieve those freedoms, and of the great US-European cooperation that continues to this day because of those struggles. Certainly, a war monument is a remembrance of the past, but it is also a beacon for the future. It is a reminder for all of us to constantly nourish our ties to other countries and other peoples. It is a way of keeping memories alive, not to dwell on sadness and death, but to think about heroism and sacrifice and freedom."

The AWMO (see www.warmemorials.org) has its own informative quarterly newsletter, with fascinating information and stories about individual graves/memorials/names on memorials - and the list is in the thousands.

We first had the pleasure of meeting Lil 'in the flesh' at Cantigny on the Somme at the inauguration of a fine statue of a Doughboy of the 28th Inf Regt in May 2008 to mark the 90th Anniversary of the battle there. The \$100,000 statue was sculpted by Stephen Spears, who also sculpted the group of three US Naval figures for the US Navy Memorial at Utah Beach and the 'Leadership' Tribute

Statue to Lt 'Dick' Winters of Easy Coy ('Band of Brothers') at Brécourt.

Spears is now working on another project in Normandy. It will be a statue to honour the French Resistance. See: <https://vimeo.com/446503885?ref=fb-share>



'Doughboy' statue, Cantigny 2008, with 'Pershing's Doughboys' re-enactor and current soldiers of US 1st Division.



Lil With Valmai at the unveiling of the 'Doughboy' Statue, Cantigny, May 2008.

Our next meeting was in Paris some years later when Lil introduced us to the building now known as Pershing Hall, which was built by the Count of Paris at the end of the 18th century. Pershing used the building as his war headquarters from 1917 through 1919, when it became the American Legion, Paris, also called ParisPost #1. The American Legion bought the building in 1928 to honour Pershing, before it changed hands again in the 1930s to the American Government. Pershing Hall had a school and shop where wealthy Parisians bought American products like Coca-Cola and gum. In 1991, the building's ownership was transferred to the Department of Veterans Affairs, after it had been abandoned and

fallen into disrepair. In 1998, a 99-year lease was signed with a French company that spent millions renovating it to become a smart 5 Star hotel - where we had a very enjoyable lunch with Lil. Still in place are Commemorative World War I plaques, dedicated to Harvard and Yale, to the American Legion and General Pershing, with a bust to General Pershing on the 4th floor and a Plaque on the 3rd floor listing the casualties of the American Expeditionary Forces from the City of New York and Medal of Honour winners of both Army and Navy in WW1.



Pershing Bust, 4th floor, Pershing Hall Hotel, Paris.



American Legion Plaque to General Pershing, Pershing Hall, Paris.

In 2015 Lil moved from Paris to Germany, where she teaches maths and statistics for the University of Maryland Global Campus, while still continuing her indefatigable work for the AWMO.

In view of the pandemic we are now experiencing, Lil gave us the following



Lil Pluke today.

information about the 1918 'Spanish Flu' epidemic as it affected the US Army: "As we all suffer through the COVID-19 lockdown, it is worth reflecting on the last important pandemic to sweep through the US and the world: the so-called Spanish Flu influenza of 1918-19. Most deadly for people ages 20 to 40, the disease raced through the training camps of the US Army and Navy in the fall of 1918 as thousands of service members lived and trained in close quarters. Then the influenza struck Navy ships and front-line troops. By the War Department's most conservative count, it sickened 26% of the entire Army and killed almost 30,000 soldiers before they even got to France. The Army lost 8,743,102 days (on both sides of the Atlantic) to influenza among enlisted men in 1918. Influenza cases outnumbered combat casualties. According to the War Departments 1919 report, 227,000 soldiers were hospitalized for battle wounds in 1918 while 340,000 were hospitalized for the flu. Of our 117,000 war dead in WWI, 57,460 died of disease and only 50,280 died in battle (7,920 died of other causes). The epidemic had a dramatic effect on the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, attacking Allied and German combatants alike, and clogging the roads and hospitals with sick and dying soldiers. Death was often startlingly rapid, within hours or a day or two after the onset of symptoms."

We asked Lil if there were any 'Flu Monuments' to US Army casualties. She replied:

"We don't know of any overseas monuments dedicated to American deaths in the flu per se, but it is useful to examine monuments erected at the sites of US Army hospitals. One such example is the town war memorial of Is-sur-Tille in the Burgundy region of France. It was erected in 1923 and based on the old chimney of Camp Williams Officers Mess. This town was the site of Camp Hospital 41 that operated from 11 March 1918 until 23 May 1919. It was a 500 bed hospital that served Camp Williams, which numbered up to 24,000 troops. This was not a combat zone, but was a transportation hub and regulating station. On one entire side of the memorial, the town has listed all of the



Is-sur-Tille American Memorial.

238 Americans that died there. And while it's impossible to determine the exact cause of death of all 238, an astonishing number that we have been able to find a cause of death for, are listed as dying of influenza, pneumonia, disease, or the flu."

Next we asked Lil to name her 'favourite' memorials.

Favourite No 1 is to **Sgt Dudley Gilman Tucker** who, on 9 May 1917, enlisted in France's *Service Aeronautique*. He underwent aviation, aerobatic, and gunnery training at Avord, Pau Air Base, earned his brevet on the Caudron aeroplane on September 30, 1917 and graduated on January 26, 1918. [Incidentally there is a memorial, erected in 1938, to the first flight of a Caudron in 1909 near the site of the factory of the Caudron brothers, in Le Crotoy. Here they built training planes. There is also an aviation museum in the town.]



The top of the Caudron brothers' Memorial Column near le Crotoy.

Tucker was first assigned to *Escadrille SPA (Société Pour l'Aviation) 74*, but soon was transferred to SPA 15. He took part in many patrol sorties from Rheims to Montdidier and on July 8, 1918, Sergeant Tucker and four other pilots of the squadron were patrolling the Marne salient when they got entangled in the defence of two French reconnaissance aircraft who were being attacked by 6 (one sometimes reads a dozen) German Fokkers. Tucker was listed as missing when he failed to return to his aerodrome following the combat. After the war, German records showed that his remains were buried in a churchyard in Checrise. He was then moved to the U.S. Military Cemetery at Seringet-Nesle and later to the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial in Marnes la Coquette, just West of Paris. In 1922, he was posthumously awarded France's *Médaille Militaire* and the *Croix de Guerre*.

After the War, Tucker's mother came to France to unveil a plaque to her son in Louatre. The inscription translates, "To the memory of Sergeant Dudley Gilman Tucker, American Volunteer to the Spad 15 Squadron, Group 13. Gloriously fell in this vicinity while fighting 6 enemy aircraft, 8 July 1918. He gave his life for Liberty. This plaque was placed by his mother, who is proud of him." Lil comments, "What Mom isn't touched by this plaque?"



Plaque to Sgt Tucker, placed by his mother in Louatre. See also: www.uswarmemorials.org/html/site_details.php?SiteID=155&keyword=louatre

Lil describes **Favourite No. 2** as ‘it amazes and delights me every time I see it. It is the town War Memorial of Murville in France. A bomber was shot down just outside of the town, killing two American aviators. The town recognized them on the *Monument aux Morts*. But check out the sculpture! Graphic, gruesome, wonderful!’ The concrete monument has a three-tier base with an elongated middle section that contains the names of the town’s war dead on its two sides. On top of the memorial is a statue of a *Poilu* holding a rifle. On the back side (south), there is a graphic scene carved into the monument depicting two American airmen, **Lieutenants Harry C. Preston and Philip N. Rhineland**, upside down underneath their crashed plane. These two U.S. airmen were shot down on September 26, 1918 by the German Richthofen Squadron during the great Argonne offensive. While they were providing cover fire for the rest of their squadron’s retreat, Rhineland and Preston’s DH4 bombing



Monument to American Lieutenants Harry C. Preston and Philip N. Rhineland, Murville. See also: https://www.uswarmemorials.org/html/monument_details.php?SiteID=483&MemID=750

plane was cut off by 5 Boche aeroplanes, who shot them down. They both died in the plane crash in Murville. There is an inscription bearing their names on the base of the sculpture.

Favourite No 3. “The third one is my favorite example of a little-known issue. As you know, next of kin of American war dead had the choice to repatriate the remains home or leave them in our cemeteries in Europe. But for many Americans, especially after WWI, “home” was where they had recently immigrated from. They elected to repatriate the remains to their homeland. So, there are several hundred American war dead buried in churchyards and family gravesites all over Europe. The map at the on-line link below shows the extent of the problem. They are impossible to trace, as the archive records just say “repatriated to Ireland” (or other



Memorial to James Mestrovich, Pennsylvania National Guard, in Montenegro See also: https://www.uswarmemorials.org/html/monument_details.php?SiteID=1379&MemID=1812

countries), with no other details. **James Mestrovich** enlisted in the Pennsylvania National Guard from California after having immigrated from Montenegro. He could barely speak English, yet rose to Sergeant and was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroism. Some sources say that he died of the flu, some say he was killed in combat. In the 1920’s, his remains were repatriated by a US battleship and he lies in the Sveti Jovan churchyard by Durasevici, Montenegro.”

Apart, however, from all the above achievements, Lil has a parallel career that explains further the ‘Wild Woman’ tag. Lil’s passion is racing bicycles and she has won many prestigious titles over the years. She is a six-time World Masters Cycling Champion in mountain biking, cyclocross, and on the track. Among recent titles are the Masters World Mountain Bike Championship in Val di Sole, Italy in September 2016 and the Masters Track Cycling Championship in Manchester in October 2019.



Lil winning Masters World Mountain Bike Championship in Val di Sole, Italy in September 2016.



Lil winning Masters Track Cycling Championship, Manchester, 2019.

She is also a qualified coach and guide for blind athletes in cycling and skiing, a professional ski instructor, is fluent in French and German, a powerful lecturer on many subjects and in 1995 wrote the book, *Breastfeeding and the Active Woman!*

We are proud to call this exceptional woman our friend.

Tonie and Valmai Holt

** This article is the third in the series of articles by Tonie and Valmai Holt on Exceptional People. The first in the series was Australian monument creator, Ross Bastiaan, the second was Richard Dunning, owner of the Lochnagar Crater on the Somme. Richard is recovering from a severe case of Long Covid 19.*