Freeholder John C. Bartlett, Jr. on World War I

By: Victoria Ford

This April marks 100 years since the United States entered the First World War. Freeholder John C. Bartlett, Jr. and the Ocean County Cultural & Heritage Commission are planning to document and commemorate the roll of Ocean County residents in The Great War, 1917 to 1918.



Freeholder Bartlett, Jr. with Ocean County World War I veterans on the 70th Anniversary..

In 2014, Ocean County Freeholder John C. Bartlett, Jr. embarked on a mission of the literary kind, to read 100 published books on the history of The Great War. He said that it was an arbitrary goal, one he has undertaken without a prepared list of titles and not necessarily in order by historic timeline. By the end of February this year he was on his 84th book and fully confident he would meet his goal.

Freeholder Bartlett holds an MA in political science and the course work for a doctorate degree at the Graduate School of Public Affairs, State University of New York at Albany. He is a retired High School honors history teacher at Toms River High School North and a retired professor at Ocean County Community College in Toms River, NJ.

Despite its being "the seminal event in modern history," in Freeholder Bartlett's opinion, the history surrounding the Great War, and so much of history in general, is too often forgotten, co-opted or corrupted over time.



Pine Beach World War I & World War II Memorial. Photo credit: C & H Staff

Even its name is problematic, he explained. The Great War was renamed "World War I" decades later only as it related to World War II. Many symbols and memories were carried over into the Second World War, almost as if the second was a continuation of the first, he said. Armistice Day was repurposed and repackaged as Veterans Day. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was a WWI monument that became the Tomb of the Unknowns, dedicated to all American service members who have died without their remains identified.

Continued on page 7

World War I from page 6

His particular fascination with the First World War begins with the creation of the first steel navies in the 1880s, which is where his reading starts in its historical context. (Coal-fired steam ships were used in only two major conflicts, the Spanish-American War in 1898 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, he explained. Coal was a dangerous material however because it produced volatile dust and was vulnerable to sabotage.)

Bartlett's fascination is further stoked by the almost clumsy way Europe stumbled into a global conflict and how its repercussions can be felt in so many events of the 20th century and are still felt today – Hitler's rise to power, the Russian revolution, the Cold War, problems in the Middle East stemming from the partitioning of land in the former Ottoman Empire. The First World War was "so much more complicated" than the Second, he said.

Based on his reading, Bartlett has drawn some conclusions about the climate of the time and the motivations of the people in charge. "I always thought it was just war propaganda, but now I know Wilson believed in his own role in changing the world." His belief, though misplaced, was sincere.

Bartlett described Wilson as a "know-it-all" and a "one-man-show." He was reelected in 1916, took office in January 1917 and the country went to war a few months later. He remade the U.S. into a total war nation, Bartlett said, whipping up a "war fever," all the while gearing the nation toward spiteful dissent.

All those jazzy war songs that set a tone of "We're going to save the world!" – when it was all over everyone was singing quite a different tune. When the world was no better off in the '20s and '30s, the country was plunged into isolationism. "When you over-sell an idea, you create a backlash that lasts a long time," Bartlett said. In fact, Bartlett noted, Wilsonian diplomacy has suffused American foreign policy ever since.

In terms of the war itself, Bartlett is intrigued by the modalities of warfare and astounded by the horrors and loss of life that result in mankind's strife. Bartlett feels the carnage, the human toll after four years of slaughter (17 million military and civilian deaths), is important to keep in proper perspective. Most Americans' understanding comes only from what is known of the Western Front. On July 1, 1916, the British lost over 20,000 men in a single battle known as the Somme Offensive. Think of that, he said, given how today we recognize each and every service person's death as the tragedy it is.

World War I was a "meat-grinder war," he said, as it ushered in new killing strategies such as aerial bombing, air ships, poison gas, and tanks, in an effort to break through the defense of trenches. The takeaway: "You can't." The tanks were underpowered, he said, and, worse, ineffective after shelling activities chewed up the terrain and made it impassable.

Looking back after 100 years, "America was totally unprepared for war," Bartlett said. Everyone was – and that's partly what Bartlett finds so fascinating. The descent into war in the first place happened like a house of cards, he said, in a matter of days. "No one wanted it, no one caused it, it just happened."



Dogfight involving Lakewood Aviator Lt. William G. Schauffler Jr.
Painting by Francis J. McGinley, 2016

Continued on page 8

World War I from page 7

For example: When a Serbian nationalist assassinates Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand (nephew of Emperor Franz Josef Ferdinand and heir to the empire), the Austro-Hungarian Empire says, "Enough with these radical wackos, let's destroy them," to which Serbia's Russian allies say, "Oh, no you don't, and we'll protect them." So the advice given to Austro-Hungary by the German Emperor Kaiser Wilhelm II is, "Do whatever you think is necessary, but do it quickly."

Germany's problem, Bartlett said, was it couldn't fight a war on two fronts, against England and France. So the solution was to mobilize an army to invade northern France, via Luxembourg and Belgium, and then turn around and meet the Russians. But the Russians acted faster than expected, and England was pulled into the fray when it rose to protect neutral Belgium.



General Hospital #9 at the Lakewood Hotel.
Painting by Francis J. McGinley, 2016

Considering WWI was closer in years to the Civil War (60) than to present-day (100), "There was hardly a national media." Communication was a whole different ballgame. So when the Germans resumed unrestricted submarine warfare knowing that would provoke the U.S. into the war (and it did), Germany's rationale was the whole thing would be over by the time the U.S. got its act together. So the U.S. did some quick bargaining with the British over shipping, but Wilson decided ("insisted," as Bartlett put it) the U.S. would have its own independent force (really, so he could have major influence at the Peace Conference). The U.S. was an Associated Power, never officially joining the Allied armies.

Germans had already begun to sink American freighters, meanwhile scheming with Mexico, via the Zimmerman telegram, named for the guy in the German Foreign Office who admitted to sending it, which proposed: In exchange for Mexico's alliance with Germany, Germany would grant to Mexico (following the U.S.'s presumed defeat) the states of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. This was after Wilson had sent Brigadier Gen. John J. Pershing to Mexico in 1916 to capture Mexican Revolutionary Gen. Francisco "Pancho" Villa, and after British had broken the German diplomatic code – all of which added to Wilson's "logical" case for going to war.

The whole thing goes to show that when everyone is doing only what seems logical for them, the result is an illogical end, according to Bartlett. When asked why they were at war, the British famously said, "We fight, because we fight, because we fight, because we fight."

And once so many men have been killed, quitting is not an option, Bartlett continued. The only option is to fight to victory – how else to justify the war to the families of those who have perished?

The Armistice happened on November 11, 1918 (11/11 at 11 a.m.), now recognized as Veterans Day, but the servicemen would come home the following year, after a peace treaty was negotiated with Germany. New Jersey troops in the occupation force returned between May and June of 1919.

Continued on page 9

World War I from page 8

One of the lasting impacts of the war was the fall of autocracies across Europe as they were unable to cope with the war weariness of their citizenry. After the Paris Peace Conference, the League of Nations was founded in 1920 on the concept of "collective security," which was a theory to end war that looked good on paper, but in practice just doesn't work. "In college I thought it was brilliant," Bartlett said. But it's too idealistic and contrary to human nature.

While the books in his lineup "have all complemented one another" and "broadened my understanding of the era, and of the war," Bartlett said, one that was especially impactful – "stomach-turning" was one word for it – was a 950-pager on the 1917 Russian Revolution, characterized by "horror, brutality and utter inhumanity," according to Bartlett, in which "each side was worse than the other." Actually it was a pair of revolutions that dismantled the Tsarist autocracy, from whence springs the phrase "the dictatorship of the proletariat," and led to the eventual rise of the Soviet Union.

One of his favorites was Richard Rubin's *The Last of the Doughboys: The Forgotten Generation and Their Forgotten World War*, a collection of stories from WWI veterans.

"It's terrible, we just ignore our history," he said. In his view, the average person doesn't think much beyond him or herself, especially in times of political unrest and extreme division like today. Only occasionally do events – usually a national crisis or tragedy, e.g., the bombing of Pearl Harbor, President John F. Kennedy's assassination, and the terror attacks of 9/11 – bring the country together "to stop and think," he said.

In Bartlett's office hangs a photo taken on the 70th anniversary of the Great War; the dozen or so veterans in the picture are in their 80s or 90s. Bartlett was 41 at the time. He will never forget (and still chokes up to recall) the moment he watched one of the oldest among them, a man whose body was wracked with age, raise his trembling hand in a salute as "Taps" was played. Bartlett still places a wreath on the monument on the courthouse lawn each Armistice Day.



Ocean County Hospital Troops in France - C. Ambrose Matthews of Lakewood died July 26, 1918.
Painting by Francis J. McGinley. 2016