

VERMONT STATE REPRESENTATIVE

Laura Sibilgia

Memorial Day is a time to honor and reflect on the lives lost while serving with the United States armed forces. On this day I often write about those who have been lost from the Deerfield Valley or who served with my soldiers in the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. In 2018 I wrote about [reflecting on the costs](#) of protecting American ideals and in 2019 about how we [honor and support the families of the fallen](#).

Given the historical nature of Memorial Day 2020, this year I've taken a look back 100 years to reflect on those American native born and immigrants who lost their lives while serving with the United States armed forces during World War I – the “war to end all wars” – which ended during another pandemic, the “Spanish Flu”. This was my great grandparents generation, some of them immigrants or children of immigrants, just about a decade before the start of the Great Depression that my grandparents grew up in.



The Atlantic [America in 1915: Long Hours, Crowded Houses, Death by Trolley. Bad news: No antibiotics. Good news: Streetcars, everywhere!](#)

World War I began in 1914 after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and lasted until 1918. During the conflict, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire (the Central Powers) fought against Great Britain, France, Russia, Italy, Romania, Japan and the United States (the Allied Powers). In 1917 President Woodrow Wilson asked the Congress for a Declaration of war again Germany.

America's entry into the war coincided with one of the largest waves of immigration in our country's history. In the forty years between 1880 and the 1920s, 23.5 million immigrants arrived in the United States, largely from Southern and Eastern Europe where the build up to the war was taking place, but also China, Japan, Canada, and Mexico. [During World War I, nearly forty percent of U.S. soldiers were immigrants or children of immigrants.](#)



[The Immigrant Army: Immigrant Service Members in World War I](#) This 1919 poster by artist Howard Chandler Christy urged Americans to support the Victory Liberty Loan by highlighting the diversity of the men serving in the American armed forces, many of whom were immigrants.



ABC News: [100 years after his death, family of immigrant WWI soldier receives his Purple Heart. The family of Pvt. Michael Walsh has waited 100 years to honor their loved one.](#) At the age of 22, Michael Walsh emigrated from rural Ireland, arriving at Ellis Island on September 3, 1911. Gravestones are decorated with American flags at the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery and Memorial in Romagne-sous-Montfaucon, eastern France. Plot H, row 11, grave 9 is the final resting place of Private Michael Walsh, Co K, 116th Infantry, 29th Division who was killed in action fighting with American armed forces on October 24th 1918.

When the war finally ended in November of 1918, more than two million soldiers serving with the American armed forces had served on the battlefields of Europe, and 50,000 of them were killed. By the time the war was over more than 16 million soldiers and civilians had died.

During the final year of World War 1, in 1918, a new influenza virus emerged which also took the lives of millions of soldiers and civilians. The conditions of the war – troops moving around the world in crowded ships and trains – caused the 1918 flu to rapidly spread. Otherwise healthy young adults combined with no vaccine or treatments created a global public health crisis, causing at least 50 million deaths worldwide, including approximately 675,000 in the United States.



September 1918 The second wave of flu emerges at Camp Devens, a United States Army training camp just outside of Boston, and at a naval facility in Boston. Between September and November, a second wave of flu peaks in the United States. This second wave is highly fatal, and responsible for most of the deaths attributed to the pandemic. New York City's Board of Health adds flu to the list of reportable diseases, and requires all flu cases to be isolated at home or in a city hospital. By the end of September, more than 14,000 flu cases are reported at Camp Devens—equaling about one-quarter of the total camp, resulting in 757 deaths. [From the CDC's 1918 Pandemic Influenza Historic Timeline](#)

The first and second waves of the virus spread in the Spring and Fall of 1918. As troops returned home en masse, packed onto ships and coming home to parades and celebrations, a third wave of the virus emerged. More U.S. soldiers died from the 1918 flu than were killed in battle during the war. Forty percent of the U.S. Navy was hit with the flu, while 36 percent of the Army became ill.

In New York in November 1918 at the end of the war, an American woman called Moina Michael came across the poem [“In Flanders Fields”](#) by John McCrae. She was so moved that she made a personal pledge to “keep the faith”. She felt compelled to make a note of this pledge and hastily scribbled down a response entitled “We Shall Keep the Faith” on the back of a used envelope. From that day she vowed to wear a red poppy of Flanders Fields as a sign of remembrance.



[Read the story of Moina Michael and how she used the symbol of the poppy to raise funds for US ex-Servicemen returning from the First World War](#)

**We Shall Keep the Faith
by Moina Michael, November 1918**

Oh! you who sleep in Flanders Fields,
Sleep sweet – to rise anew!
We caught the torch you threw
And holding high, we keep the Faith
With All who died.
We cherish, too, the poppy red
That grows on fields where valor led;
It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies,
But lends a lustre to the red
Of the flower that blooms above the dead
In Flanders Fields.
And now the Torch and Poppy Red
We wear in honor of our dead.
Fear not that ye have died for naught;
We'll teach the lesson that ye wrought
In Flanders Fields.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with questions, or if you need assistance navigating government services at (802) 384-0233 or lsibilia@leg.state.vt.us

Kind regards,

Rep. Laura Sibilia
Dover, Readsboro, Searsburg, Somerset, Stamford, Wardsboro, Whitingham