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The American Society of Le Souvenir Français Inc.
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REMEMBERING WWII FRENCH AVIATORS IN THE UNITED STATES



(Instructor Herbert Cain introduces his French students to their new trainer. (AFHRA))

Photo credit: Vaughan, David K. "The French Pilot Training Experience at Oscoda Army Air Field During World War II." *Air Power History*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2017, pp. 37–46. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26571039.

**MORE THAN 4,000 FRENCH AVIATORS WERE
TRAINED BY THE US AIR FORCE IN THE UNITED
STATES DURING WWII.
MORE THAN 60 DIED IN TRAINING AND
20 ARE BURIED IN ALABAMA**

IN RECOGNITION OF VE-DAY MAY 8TH, THE AMERICAN
SOCIETY OF LE SOUVENIR FRANÇAIS WISHES TO
HIGHLIGHT THIS RELATIVELY UNKNOWN CHAPTER OF

THE LONG TRADITION OF FRIENDSHIP AND COOPERATION BETWEEN FRENCH AND US ARMIES.

During World War II, approximately 4,100 French Air Force aviators and ground personnel came to the United States. After the British, it was the largest contingent to receive combat training in several US Air Forces bases, principally in Maxwell Airforce Base and Gunter Field, both in Montgomery, Alabama and Selfridge and Oscoda-Wurtsmith,, Michigan, where 700 officers and 2,300 enlisted men were trained as bombers.

Sadly, more than 60 of them died in crashes while training. 20 are buried in Alabama, alongside 78 Royal Air Force student pilots.

This is the story of a lesser known chapter of a longstanding, secular collaboration between the French and American Armed Forces.



At the time of the armistice of June 18, 1940, many French Air Force fighter pilots managed to fly to England to continue the fight against the Nazis. Several of them immediately were incorporated in the Royal Air Force, and eventually started the nucleus of the Free French Air Force. Others were able to join North Africa, where sizable units were stationed.

In November 1942 the Allies invaded North Africa, defeating the Axis forces there and liberating the French units in Algeria, Morocco, and later Tunisia. These units merged with the Free French units to rebuild the French Armed forces, who rejoined the war until the signing of the German capitulation in Reims on May 8, 1945.

Under the Lend-Lease act, the French Army and Air Force benefited from brand new American military equipment. As there were not enough instructors or training fields, more than 4,000 French student pilots and their mechanics were sent to the United States for flight training, thus joining thousands of Royal Air Force personnel who had benefited from the program since 1941.

French cadets primarily went to Tuscaloosa, Alabama for basic training at Gunter Field, advanced single-engine training at Craig Field, near Selma, and twin-engine training at Turner Field, outside Albany, Georgia. Later, more highly specialized training centers were

established throughout the country, among them Tyndall Field in Florida for machine gunners, Lowry Field, Colorado, for armament technicians, Scott Field, Illinois, for radio personnel, Selfridge in Michigan for bomber pilots.

In spite of early difficulties (unlike their RAF counterparts, they had to scramble to understand the instructions given in English, and the US Air Force had to find pilots instructors and translators who could explain highly technical terms in French!) the French cadets quickly gained the esteem of their American instructors.

Of the first group of 75 French cadets at Gunter, 72 graduated and earned high praise. According to a US Air Force report, they had shown “zealous enthusiasm” in most aspects of training.

Another group of 100 achieved an impressive 75 percent success rate at primary training and thus avoided reassignment to navigator or other non-pilot training. (Socially, they appeared to have been successful as well: The August 14, 1943 issue of the military *Training News* reported that “Americans at Van de Graaf like the enthusiastic, voluble French better than the reserved British cadets who preceded them.”) In September, the pilots moved on to Gunter Field for basic training.



A civilian translator in action: although French students brought language challenges and required the introduction of translators, Free French policies for selecting personnel for training compensated for this challenge by sending particularly eager and diligent students to the United States for pilot training.



"ILS GRANDIRONT" ("They will grow") was the motto of the French fighters units trained by US Air Force instructors.

A VISIT TO REMEMBER...



Photo Credit: Air Force Historical Research Agency contributed by P. Laverdet

DE GAULLE AT SELFRIDGE

A singularly touching picture of Gen. Charles de Gaulle, the towering provisional president of France, talking informally with young French air cadets, who pressed forward eagerly to meet him after he addressed them briefly at Selfridge Field. The expressions of the young fliers, as they listen to their leader speak of their future in the new France, are uniformly intent.

Photo by Edward Reid, Times Staff Photographer.



"De Gaulle Visits Selfridge: French Leader Reviews Troops at Air Base," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, August 28, 1945, p.1, col.1.

General De Gaulle flew into Selfridge Field on August 27, 1945, while in the United States to call on President Harry S. Truman.

The visit was related in the *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, August 28, 1945, p.1, col.1.:

"

Général De Gaulle was given a booming 21-gun salute as he stepped from his C-54 transport. After offering a crisp salute to the assembled American troops standing at attention the general extended thanks to his American hosts:

"I especially wanted to stop at Selfridge Field, this important American Air base, where the French Cadets receive the finishing touch to their training, to show my interest in there young students and to bring the thanks of France to the American people and their American Air Force for their help they have extended to us during the war, towards the formation of our crews and the rebuilding of our air force."

Following his address, De Gaulle saluted both nations, boarded his plane, and was gone. The visit had lasted only 40 minutes, but made a great impression upon his American hosts and was an immeasurable morale boost for his French cadets.

"

PAYING HOMAGE TO 20 GRAVES OF FRENCH PILOTS IN ALABAMA

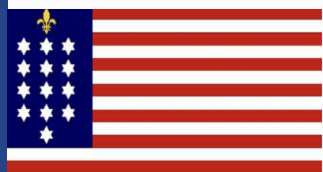


The Oakwood Cemetery Annex in Montgomery, Alabama, holds the largest Commonwealth War Grave in the United States, and is home to the graves of 78 Royal Air Force and 20 French Air Force airmen who lost their lives flying training accidents in the Southeast U.S. during World War II.

“They fell far from the battlefield and from home,” said French Air Force Lieutenant-Colonel Fabrice Imbo. “They made the ultimate sacrifice for France and our freedom.”



Photos credit: The cemetery is the most visible reminder that French student pilots once raced across the skies of Alabama. Van de Graaf Field is now Tuscaloosa Municipal Airport. Gunter Field, now Gunter Annex, is no longer an airfield but an Air Force educational facility.



**The American Society
of
Le Souvenir Français
at Valley Forge, PA.
"French Alliance Day"**

This past Sunday, May 2nd, a very solemn and moving ceremony took place at the Washington Memorial Chapel in Valley Forge, PA.

As our last Bulletin of April recounted, back in 1778, General George Washington ordered that every first Sunday in May a celebratory mass be held to thank France for signing the

Treaty of Alliance with the United States, "by which France, first of all nations, recognized the independence of the United States".

We are thankful to the Washington Memorial Heritage, and all the organizations listed below, for their invitation and warm welcome.

Mr. Michael Scullin, Honorary Consul of France in Philadelphia and Wilmington, made introductory remarks, and Thierry Chaunu delivered a speech to the congregants celebrating the unique 243-old alliance between France and the United States, which continues strong today. Mr. Alain Dupuis, President of the Federation of French War Veterans, and 2nd Vice-President of our association, participated.

Two wreaths were laid next to the plaque honoring General Lafayette under the porch of this historic chapel, as 13 carillons played the Marseillaise.

The event was organized by:
the **Washington Memorial Heritage**
and
the **Washington Memorial Chapel**

With the participation of:
Sons of the American Revolution (which provides a Color Guard)
Pennsylvania Society Sons of the Revolution
Pennsylvania Society Sons of the American Revolution
Pennsylvania Society Daughters of the American Revolution
National Society Colonial Dames of America in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Colonial Dames of America
Penn's Grant Chapter of the Colonial Dames of the XVIIth Century
National Huguenot Society
Huguenot Society of Pennsylvania
Order of Founders and Patriots
Society of the Cincinnati (Maryland and Pennsylvania)
Washington- Rochambeau Revolutionary Route
Patriotic Order of Sons of America
National Park Service - Valley Forge National Historical Park



Our association is pleased to share the impressive work done by TheLafayetteTrail.org in view of the 200th anniversary of his triumphal tour of 1824 as "Guest of the Nation" throughout 24 States, and to promote the following LAFAYETTE TRAIL MARKER DEDICATION CEREMONIES IN MAY:

A bronze plaque will be dedicated on **May 17, 2021** at **Fort Hamilton, NYC**, to mark General Lafayette's arrival in New York harbor (attendance restricted due to Covid).

There will be a dedication in **Niagara Falls** on May 20, 2021 at 2PM EDT (please RSVP by Monday, May 17th by clicking on the following link: <https://secure.givelively.org/event/lafayette-trail/niagara-falls>)

There will also be 3 Lafayette Trail Marker dedication ceremonies in New Hampshire:

1. **Greenland NH**, Monday, **May 3rd at 10AM** (2 Post Road);
 2. **Derry NH**, Tuesday, **May 4th at 10AM** (17 Nesmith Street);
 3. **Hopkinton NH**, Wednesday, **May 5th at 2PM** (354 Main Street);
- No RSVP is required to attend the dedication ceremonies in Greenland and Hopkinton. RSVP is required to attend the Derry event. This can be done easily by emailing Elizabeth Robidoux at: elizabethrobidoux@derrynh.org

For more information and donations, contact.
www.thelafayettetrail.org



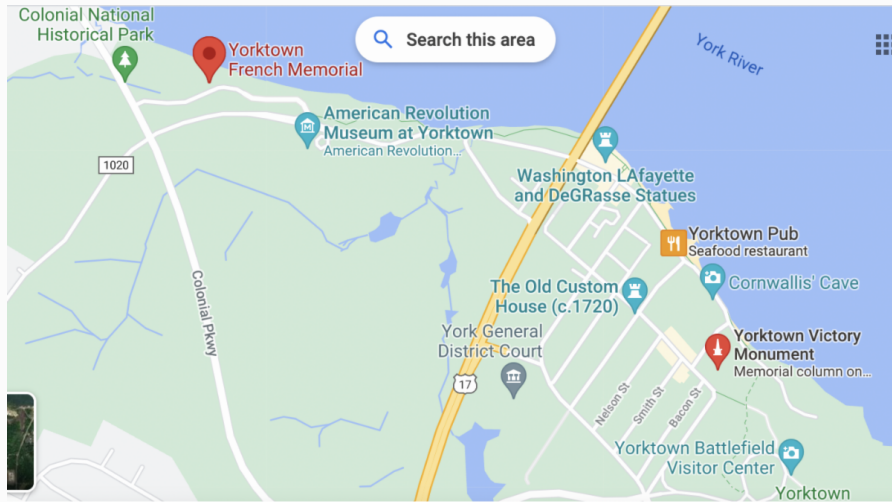
YORKTOWN, VA.

Following the fantastic work done by several volunteers of the **American Friends of Lafayette** this past April 10 to clean up and embellish with new plantations at the "**French Cemetery**", plans are made to embellish the "**French Monument**"

Some 600 names brave French soldiers and sailors who died in Yorktown and at the Battle of the Capes are listed in a beautiful stone

monument at the outskirts of Yorktown, a few steps from the American Revolution Museum.

The **American Friends of Lafayette** is holding its annual event on June 10th in Yorktown. We encourage our members to join this great organization. For more details, please visit: <https://friendsoflafayette.wildapricot.org/>



NEWPORT, R.I.

Since our last bulletin, the date for the dedication of the two grave markers for the two French Navy Officers buried in Trinity Church, Newport, RI, has been moved a day earlier to **Friday**

September 10.

Stay tuned for more details, as several patriotic and historical associations will host a number of events in Newport throughout the weekend.



WASHINGTON-ROCHAMBEAU ROUTE

Watch for more news in the coming months as we honor General Rochambeau, Commander of the French Army, in cooperation with the National Park Service - Washington-

Rochambeau Route and the 240th celebration of the final Victory at Yorktown, VA on October 15-19, 2021.



HONORING THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER

Alongside the Society of the Honor Guard / Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and at their invitation, we will celebrate the Centennial of the transfer of the US

Unknown Soldier from France to the United States on board the **USS Olympia** on **October 25, 2021**.

A simultaneous ceremony is also planned in Le Havre, France, to commemorate this poignant event. On that day in 1921, the population of Le Havre lined up in total silence to pay its final respect to a brave American Soldier who made the ultimate sacrifice to defend France and for the cause of Freedom. Mr. André Maginot, then Minister of Pensions, affixed a Legion of Honor on the Stars & Stripes draped coffin, before it was raised on the deck of the *USS Olympia* for the last crossing.

Another ceremony is planned at the Arlington National Cemetery at the Mausoleum of the Unknown Soldier on November 11, 2021.

Our special thanks to Mr. Michael Flynn, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of the Independence Seaport Museum in Philadelphia, and **Mr. Greg Williams** for the fascinating guided tour of the historic 1895 cruiser given to Alain Dupuis, president of the Federation of French War Veterans and Thierry Chaunu (pictured above).

We highly recommend a visit to the Independence Seaport Museum in Philadelphia, where one can also visit the WWII submarine *USS Becunia*.

phillyseaport.org

Please also visit:

<https://tombguard.org/> to learn more about the awe-inspiring Tomb Guards and their unique dedication to service. We salute you with utmost respect.

A NEW GRAVE MARKER FOR WWI AMERICAN HERO EUGENE BULLARD

Recognized by the US Air Force as "The First African American fighter pilot in history"

Following our February 2021 Bulletin, which



recounted the incredible story of Eugene Bullard, buried in the French War Veterans lot at Flushing cemetery, NY, Mr. Alain Dupuis, President of the Federation of French War Veterans and 2nd Vice-President of the Souvenir Français USA proposed that we improve the grave marker of this true American Hero who fought two world wars under French uniform.

Since a Mausoleum wasn't approved by the cemetery, the Board of the Souvenir Français USA voted unanimously to acquire two authentic, period-correct medals of the Legion of Honor and the "Croix de Guerre" with palm, and have them incorporated into a grave marker with new technology which allows for the medals to be inserted within the stone and covered by a special type of transparent resin, which should last for decades.

We will share with you the outcome of this proper tribute given to Eugene Bullard, and will let you know when a re-dedication ceremony will be held, on or around next Armistice Day, November 11, 2021.

The American Society of Le Souvenir Français Inc. aims:

- To preserve the memory of the French soldiers, sailors and airmen who gave their lives for freedom, and who are buried in the United States.
- To honor French Citizens who did great deeds in the United States, or with a strong connection with the United States,
- To promote esteem for French military heritage in the United States,
- To strengthen the long-standing traditional bonds of friendship between the American and French peoples, and to this end: erect or maintain memorials and monuments and encourage historical research, public presentations and publications in the media.

Le Souvenir Français, a French association under the high patronage of the President of the Republic, was born in 1872 in occupied Alsace-Lorraine, and was founded in 1887 in Paris by Professor Xavier Niessen. The association has more than 300,000 members in France and in more than 45 countries.

In the United States, the American Society of Le Souvenir Français (Souvenir Français USA) has been represented since the First World War by a General Delegate, among whom were Dr Jules Pierre, MM. Bruno Kaiser, Colonel Roger Cestac, Christian Bickert, Mathieu Petitjean, and Jean Lachaud. The association is presided since November 2020 by CF(H) Thierry Chaunu (H) Lt Cdr., French Navy.

The American Society of Le Souvenir Français, Inc. is a 501(c)3 corporation established in 1993 in NY.

April Bulletin celebrating the annual commemoration of “French Alliance Day” in Valley Forge, PA

<https://conta.cc/3a6pjvm> (original version in English)

<https://conta.cc/3g9bGPO> (version en français)

March newsletter honoring two French Navy officers from Rochambeau’s army buried in Newport, RI.

<https://conta.cc/3bC7aGJ> (pour la version en français)

<https://conta.cc/3vgTuZy> (original version in English)

February Bulletin honoring Eugene Bullard, America's first Black Fighter Pilot:

<https://conta.cc/3scOXoB> (original version in English)

<https://conta.cc/2NijFHJ> (pour la version en français)

Join us!

Help us implement several historic commemorative projects celebrating the 243-year-old Franco-American friendship and alliance!

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