

*Nebraska*  
AND THE

GREAT WAR

World War I left a legacy in Nebraska  
that remains strong 100 years later

BY MATT MASICH

Military police of the 63rd Balloon Company stand guard at Fort Omaha, where most of the United States' observation balloon crews trained during World War I.



## What was World War I?

World War I tore apart Europe from 1914 to 1918, claiming the lives of 11 million military personnel and 7 million civilians. It began when a Serbian nationalist assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, on June 28, 1914.

This set off a chain reaction of alliances: Austria-Hungary threatened war with Serbia, an ally of Russia; Russia threatened war with Austria-Hungary, an ally of Germany; Germany threatened war with Russia, an ally of the United Kingdom and France. It took just one month for the threats to turn into actual declarations of war, and by August 1914 the international conflagration had ignited.

America stayed out of the fight as German advances bogged down in France and locked into a stalemate with French

and British troops on what became known as the Western Front, parallel lines of trenches that ran 440 miles from Switzerland to the North Sea. The war saw the first widespread use of airplanes, tanks, submarines and poison gas in combat. Modern artillery and machine guns proved devastating against armies using outdated 19th century tactics.

German submarine attacks on British ships killed a number of American passengers, helping spur the United States' decision to enter the war in 1917 on the side of the Allies – the United Kingdom, France, Russia and Italy – against the Central Powers – Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. Although the United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, with the first troops arriving in France

a few months later, American units didn't begin serious fighting until May 1918. The influx of American men and materiel began to push the Germans back. Seeing the futility of continued fighting, Germany sued for peace. Fighting ended on Armistice Day, Nov. 11, 1918.

Even though World War I doesn't get nearly as much attention as World War II, many historians consider it the most consequential event of the 20th century. Among other things, World War I directly led to the emergence of the United States as a leading world power; the Russian Revolution and the founding of the Soviet Union; the rise of Fascism in Italy and the Nazi Party in Germany; and World War II, which can be viewed as a continuation of World War I after a 20-year intermission.

American soldiers repair phone lines during a gas attack. Doughboys undergo an inspection prior to shipping out. French soldiers take shelter in a trench, a hallmark of World War I. Nurses care for wounded men in a hospital in Belgium.



Nebraska State Historical Society (all)

Army enlistees pose on Lincoln's 13th Street in July 1918. A soldier kisses his sweetheart before departing Lincoln. Men dress up as Uncle Sam and German Kaiser Wilhelm II at a war parade.

**T**HE GREAT WAR, as World War I was called when it was happening, had been raging for four years when the nearly all-Nebraskan 355th Infantry Regiment, 89th Division, arrived in the frontline trenches in France on Aug. 4, 1918. The Germans in the opposing trenches gave them a big welcome three days later.

The first gas shell exploded near the Nebraskans' trenches at 10:30 p.m. on Aug. 7. The American soldiers scrambled to don their gas masks and jumped into their protective dugouts as lethal phosgene and mustard gas spewed into the night air. Between 9,000 and 10,000 shells exploded around the division's lines that night, letting up for an hour around midnight before resuming until almost 3 a.m.

Many of the inexperienced Nebraskans didn't know the gas was still deadly even hours or days after the initial shell bursts, and no one told them that standard practice was to abandon the forward trenches and retreat to back-up positions in case of a gas attack. The Nebraskans and the rest of their division held their ground; 42 men died from gas poisoning in the area of the Bois de la Hazelle that came to be known as "Gas Hollow." It was a fitting introduction to a war that had been characterized both by incredible bravery and senseless death.

The 4,000 men of the 355th Infantry Regiment were among the nearly 48,000 Nebraskans who served in the military during World War I; 751 Nebraskans died, including 349 killed in action. All told, more than 4 million Americans served during the war, and 116,000 died.

Nebraskans on the homefront might have made an even more important impact on the war effort, producing a significant amount of the food that fueled the Allied armies. Families adopted Meatless Mondays and Wheatless Wednesdays to conserve food, and everyday citizens bought Liberty Bonds to fund the war.

Even though most Nebraskans never saw a battlefield, they felt like they had been part of the war effort, said Eli Paul, former historian with the Nebraska State Historical Society and retired museum director of the National World War I Museum and Memorial in Kansas City. Many communities erected statues and memorials honoring their hometown heroes after the war, he said, but as we reach the 100th anniversary of America's entry into World War I, the significance of these memorials has faded.

"Ask your typical Nebraskan what Memorial Stadium in Lincoln is a memorial to," Paul said. "I think most people don't realize it's a memorial to Nebraskans who died in World War I."

## TOP GENERAL CALLED NEBRASKA HOME

Only two American generals achieved the nation's highest military rank, General of the Armies. One of them was George Washington, although the designation came posthumously. The other was Gen. John J. Pershing, the supreme American commander during World War I – and a member of the Nebraska Hall of Fame.

Pershing was a second lieutenant just five years out of West Point when he arrived in Lincoln in 1891 to become a professor of military science and tactics at the University of Nebraska. He took charge of the university's cadets, the equivalent of today's ROTC, and transformed the undisciplined crew into the best college drill unit in the country. The group named itself the Pershing Rifles, which today has 60 branches at colleges across the nation.

Pershing also taught mathematics at the University of Nebraska – Willa Cather was one of his students. He earned a law degree while on the faculty and befriended Lincoln lawyer and future U.S. Vice President Charles Dawes. Pershing considered leaving the Army to practice law, but Dawes helped persuade him to remain a soldier. Although Pershing was reassigned to West Point in 1895, he purchased houses for himself and his family in Lincoln, and the native Missourian would for the rest of his life consider Nebraska his home.

In the Spanish-American War in 1898, Pershing's African-American troops charged up San Juan and Kettle hills at the climactic battle in Cuba, fighting alongside Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders and earning the future president's esteem. As president, Roosevelt promoted Pershing to brigadier general.

Pershing married and had four children, but tragedy struck in 1915 when his wife and three daughters died in a house fire; his

surviving son, Warren, went to live with his aunts in Lincoln. The next year, Pershing led the campaign against Pancho Villa in Mexico, where American soldiers earned the nickname "dough-boys" because their dust-caked uniforms resembled adobe bricks. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson chose Pershing to lead the American Expeditionary Forces.

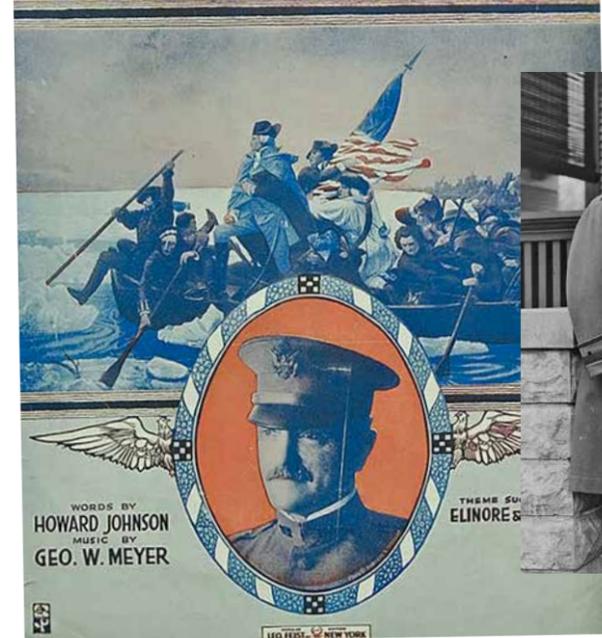
America had sent small armies overseas before, but never had it attempted anything of the scale of this operation. Pershing oversaw the growth of the 126,000-man peacetime Army into a force that sent nearly 2.5 million men into France.

"Pershing was the first American general to have to deal with an international global conflict," said Mark Hall, a Lincoln historian and Army veteran who has long admired and studied Pershing. "His organizational skills were tremendous, and his force of will kept the American Army separate from the French and British."

Pershing was not a brilliant tactician, but the tenacity he showed in the war's final campaign turned the tide against the Germans and convinced their leaders they couldn't win. The fighting was still mainly in France and Belgium when the war ended, and Pershing was nearly alone among Allied commanders in his desire to keep fighting all the way to Berlin to force an unconditional surrender. That didn't happen, but in hindsight it might have prevented World War II, which began in part because Germans felt they could have won World War I if their leaders hadn't given up while their army was still intact.

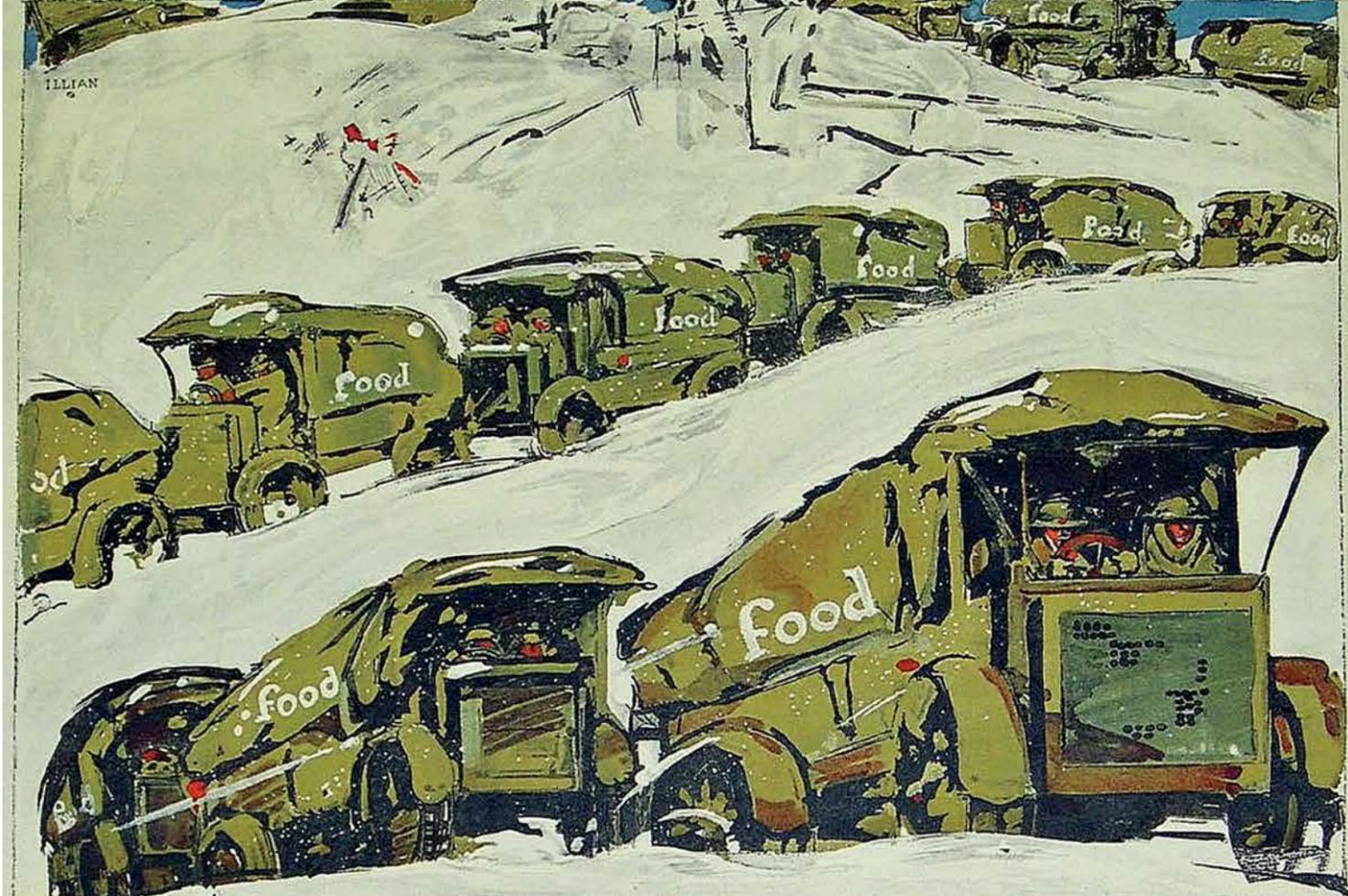
Perhaps Pershing's biggest legacy is the influence he had on the American leaders of World War II. Gen. George S. Patton was Pershing's aide-de-camp during World War I (and his sister was briefly engaged to Pershing); Gen. George Marshall, the Army's chief of staff during World War II, took over as Pershing's aide-de-camp and learned about the logistics of fielding a massive army from him; Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower collaborated with Pershing to write *A Guide to the American Battle Fields in Europe*, gaining extensive knowledge that served him well in the next World War.

JUST LIKE WASHINGTON CROSSED THE DELAWARE,  
GENERAL PERSHING WILL CROSS THE RHINE



Posters: Nebraska State Historical Society Above: Photo Courtesy Ron Kallhoff

Popular songs toasted Gen. John J. Pershing, head of the American Expeditionary Forces. Pershing stands with his son, Warren, and sisters in front of his house on B Street in Lincoln. A quote from Pershing encourages Americans to conserve food to help feed war-torn Europe.



**KEEP it COMING**

“We must not only feed our Soldiers at the front but the millions of women & children behind our lines”

*Gen. John J. Pershing*



**WASTE NOTHING**

UNITED

STATES

FOOD

ADMINISTRATION

## BRYAN AND NORRIS TAKE BRAVE STANDS

The era's two most prominent Nebraska politicians both opposed America's entrance to World War I. William Jennings Bryan of Lincoln, the losing candidate in three presidential elections, joined President Woodrow Wilson's cabinet as secretary of state in 1913. When war broke out in Europe the next year, Bryan steadfastly supported remaining neutral.

American neutrality was put to the test when a German U-boat sunk the British passenger ship *Lusitania* in May 1915, killing 1,198 people aboard, including 128 Americans. Wilson and most U.S. newspapers were outraged by the attack. Bryan took a more evenhanded view.

Germany had declared open submarine warfare on all British vessels, especially those carrying weapons and ammunition, as the *Lusitania* was. Bryan was troubled by the loss of American lives, but he acknowledged that Americans were taking their lives in their hands when they set sail on British ships into a war zone. He also denounced the British naval blockade of Germany, which had completely cut off the country from trade by sea, causing severe food shortages. "Why be so shocked by the drowning of a few people, if there is to be no objection to starving a nation," Bryan said.

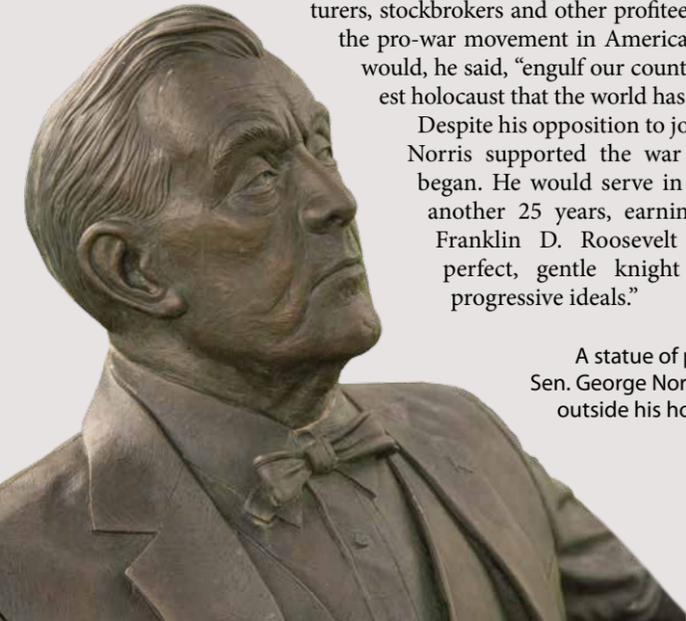
Wilson took a harder stance, drafting a letter to Germany demanding it stop submarine warfare immediately. Bryan, who saw the letter as the prelude to a declaration of war against Germany, resigned rather than sign it.

Germany reined in its submarine campaign against merchant ships in 1916 only to announce a return to unrestricted submarine warfare early the next year. That, combined with an intercepted German telegram urging Mexico to go to war against the United States, prompted Wilson to ask Congress to approve a declaration of war against Germany in April 1917.

The war declaration passed the Senate 82-6. One of the few "no" votes was Sen. George Norris of McCook, a progressive in domestic politics and an isolationist in international matters. In a speech before the vote, Norris argued that the United Kingdom and Germany were both guilty of violating international law, and that munitions manufacturers, stockbrokers and other profiteers were behind the pro-war movement in America. Going to war would, he said, "engulf our country in the greatest holocaust that the world has ever known."

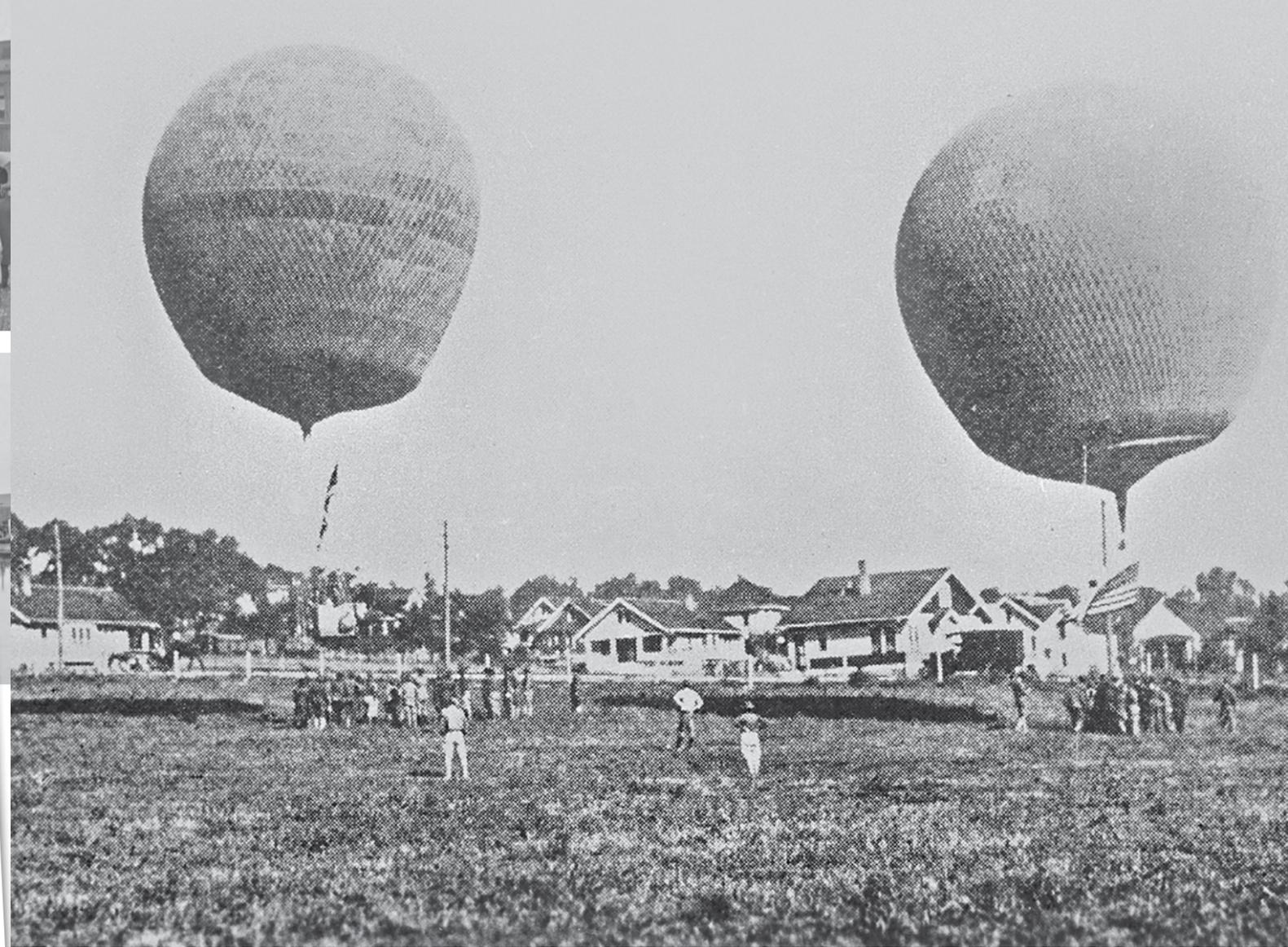
Despite his opposition to joining the fight, Norris supported the war effort once it began. He would serve in the Senate for another 25 years, earning praise from Franklin D. Roosevelt as "the very perfect, gentle knight of American progressive ideals."

A statue of progressive U.S. Sen. George Norris keeps watch outside his home in McCook.



Series: Nebraska State Historical Society Framed image: The Durham Museum

Draftees depart the Wahoo train depot in 1917. The Nebraska Potash Co. was one of five plants that sprung up in Antioch during the war to produce potash, used in fertilizer; Antioch, whose population swelled to 5,000 a century ago, is now a ghost town. Female Union Pacific employees in Omaha replaced men who left to fight. Children grow food in a victory garden; a popular poem said, "Eat the potatoes, save the wheat, drive the Kaiser to defeat."



Nebraska State Historical Society

Balloons rise above the Fort Omaha Balloon School, which trained the majority of American balloon crews that saw action in World War I. Observation balloons went up behind the trenches before each battle to monitor enemy activity and help direct artillery fire.

## BIRD'S EYE ON THE BATTLEFIELD

American soldiers in World War I would have been fighting blind if it weren't for the daring balloonists trained at the Fort Omaha Balloon School.

While soldiers in the trenches could only see the few yards of mud in front of them, observers in the baskets of tethered balloons could look down on enemy lines from 4,000 feet in the air, providing commanders with detailed reports of enemy troop locations and armaments, while also helping dial in the artillery fire of their own side.

Most of the soldiers in the American balloon service trained at the Fort Omaha Balloon School and its nearby training ground at Florence Field, both north of the city of Omaha. More than 16,000 men prepared for their wartime role here, filling the ranks of 13 of the 17 American balloon companies that saw frontline action during the war.

Being a balloon observer was not a cushy job. The wind would whip the balloons around like a kite, said John Peterson of Omaha, whose father trained at Fort Omaha but didn't make it overseas before the war ended. "When they started training, the instructors told them that the first thing you do is lose your lunch over the side of the balloon's basket," Peterson said.

German fighter planes would attack the balloons, forcing the observers to parachute to safety. In addition to the threat of enemy bullets, balloons were in constant danger of exploding, as they were filled with highly flammable hydrogen gas. Undaunted, the American balloonists racked up 5,866 balloon ascensions during the war, providing invaluable intelligence.

The Fort Omaha Balloon School closed in 1921. The fort now houses the campus of Metropolitan Community College; Florence Field is a North Omaha subdivision.



Fighter pilot Orville Ralston stands before his plane in his flight jacket and helmet. He shot down seven German planes in the war.

## NEBRASKA'S ONLY ACE FIGHTS FOKKERS

Nebraska's best-known World War I pilot was Jarvis Offutt, the namesake of Offutt Air Force Base, near his native Omaha. Offutt didn't see combat during the war – he died in a 1918 crash while ferrying a plane from Great Britain to France – but his friend and fellow Nebraskan Orville Ralston went on to become the state's only fighter ace of the war.

Ralston, a native of Weeping Water, was a second-year dental student at the University of Nebraska when the United States declared war. He immediately enlisted in the Army, but he quickly latched on to the idea of becoming a pilot. This took some courage, as airplanes, invented in 1903, still had a lot of kinks to be worked out.

While in basic training at Fort Snelling, Minnesota, Ralston and a friend would secretly climb to the top of a water tower and look down on the green banks of the nearby Mississippi River because, he later wrote, "It seemed to be the nearest thing to flying we could imagine." His dream came true when he was selected to train with the Royal Flying Corps in Canada – the United States didn't yet have a combat air force.

Ralston was the first of his group to fly solo – after just 2 ½ hours of instruction – and completed his training in Texas before arriving in Britain in January 1918. He flew his first combat mission in July. Two weeks later, he shot down a German Fokker fighter plane for his first confirmed kill. "Believe me, it was great sport and I was thoroughly crazed over the fight," he wrote in his diary.

He would go on to carve seven notches in the wooden handle of his aircraft's controls for the seven German planes he shot down, though he only had official confirmation for five. Still, those five were enough to qualify him as an ace.

Ralston's most daring kill came on Sept. 26, 1918, when he dropped out of formation with engine trouble, only to turn back around to join the fight when he saw five Fokkers closing in on three of his comrades. He maneuvered behind one of the Fokkers and opened fire, but the German plane escaped into a cloud. Ralston followed closely, though he knew he risked colliding with the German. Dropping out of the cloud, he spotted the Fokker and fired a machine-gun burst at close range, sending the enemy spiraling into the ground. Ralston escaped back into the cloud, evading the other four German pursuers. He earned the Distinguished Service Cross for his bravery.

Ralston returned to Nebraska after the war, finishing college and becoming a dentist in Ainsworth and later in Valentine. He volunteered for service again during World War II but died in 1942 when the B-17 on which he was a passenger crashed in Montana.

## BAD TIME TO BE GERMAN

Nearly 20 percent of Nebraskans during World War I were either born in Germany or had at least one parent born there. The vast majority had become loyal Americans, but that didn't stop their neighbors from considering them "enemy aliens." Any German-American who spoke out against the war, or even failed to donate to the Red Cross or buy enough Liberty Bonds, risked dire consequences.

Rudolph Schopke was born in Germany but had immigrated to Nebraska and, over the course of 35 years, had become a successful banker in Emerson. In April 1918, the *Dakota County Herald* reported that Schopke "was tarred and feathered and driven through the streets of the town because of alleged pro-German sympathies. It is alleged that he told Red Cross workers he owed the United States nothing and that they could go to hell as far as he was concerned."

The Nebraska Council of Defense, originally organized to do Red Cross work and conduct Liberty Bond drives, became a self-appointed police force to gather evidence of disloyalty. In a typical case, the council collected an affidavit when someone overheard German-American Tom Kerl of Oakland say, "Why should one buy Liberty Bonds when the money is to be used to buy bullets to kill the relatives who live in Germany of the man buying the bonds?"

Some local authorities arrested pastors who preached in German. Schools that taught in German were pressured to switch to English; a few months after the war ended, the Nebraska Legislature made the English-only school policy the law of the land.

The Nebraska villages of Berlin and Germantown, whose citizens were mostly German-American, voluntarily changed their names to avoid harassment. Berlin became Otoe, where today the only sign of the old name is the carved inscription "Bank of Berlin" on a building on Main Street. Germantown is now Garland, named after Raymond Garland, the first local soldier to die while serving in the armed forces during the war.

The end of the war and the change of town names didn't stop the anti-German discrimination. The Ku Klux Klan had a resurgence in the immediate postwar years, targeting immigrants in addition to African-Americans. Lawrence Lutjemeyer of Otoe grew up hearing stories of his German-born great-grandfather Herman Lutjemeyer sleeping with a shotgun near his bed in case hooded vigilantes came for his family at night – the KKK had burned a cross across the road from his family farm.

By the end of the 1920s, however, the anti-German feelings had subsided. "The Germans who came here believed in the American dream," Lutjemeyer said. "They were willing to work for it and fight for it, and they stuck it out."



## REMEMBERING THE 'WAR TO END ALL WARS'

Many of Nebraska's memorials to World War I have faded into obscurity over the past century, even though some, like Lincoln Memorial Stadium, remain well known.

Roscoe "Dusty" Rhodes was elected to be the 1918 captain of the University of Nebraska Cornhuskers football team. Instead of playing football as captain that fall, he fought in France as a sergeant in the 342nd Machine Gun Battalion, 89th Division. Rhodes was killed in action during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive on Oct. 25, 1918, less than three weeks before the war ended.

Within months of Rhodes' death, the Nebraska Memorial Association formed to create a memorial to their fallen captain-turned-sergeant. The memorial idea grew more elaborate, with plans drawn up for the Nebraska Soldiers and Sailors Memorial, which was to include a stadium, museum, gym and veterans' assembly room. Fundraising troubles scuttled the more grandiose plans, but ground was broken for Memorial Stadium in Lincoln in 1923.

Nebraska's most celebrated novelist, Willa Cather, is revered today for her Prairie Trilogy – *O Pioneers!*, *Song of the Lark* and *My Antonia* – but the World War I novel for which she won her sole Pulitzer Prize is largely forgotten by modern readers. *One of Ours* is her personal memorial to her cousin, 2nd Lt. Grosvenor P. Cather, fictionalized as Nebraska farm boy Claude Wheeler. Her cousin's death while rallying his men at the Battle of Cantigny, the first American battle of the war, shook Cather to her core.

"God knows I never wanted to write a war story," she wrote in a letter to a friend. "I lost six months, refraining from putting pen

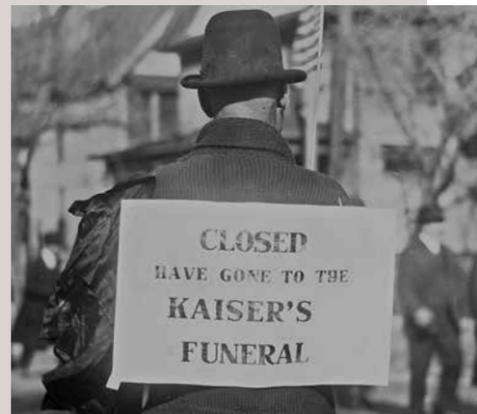
to paper on this one. But it stood between me and anything else."

Readers don't come away with a tidy moral when the fictional Claude dies at the end of *One of Ours*, said Tracy Tucker, education director at the Willa Cather Foundation in Red Cloud. "On one hand, Claude lost his life for what he saw as a noble cause, this great ideal," Tucker said. "On the other hand, what exactly did his death accomplish? Some people might view that and say, 'Nothing.'"

Nebraskans who couldn't build massive stadiums or write great works of literature found other ways to honor those who had served. Many towns erected statues, such as the bronze World War I doughboy erected in front of Norfolk Junior High School shortly after the war as a memorial to all U.S. servicemen.

When Mike Hart was principal at the school, he initiated two projects to bring greater attention to the doughboy memorial. Students, who nicknamed the bronze soldier "Charlie," raised money to install benches, revamp the sidewalk and otherwise make the memorial more inviting to visitors. Hart and his students later launched a campaign to raise money to clean decades of oxidation and grime off Charlie.

"We did the best we could do to get the students to understand the context of the statue and what it represented," said Hart, who served 20 years in the Army National Guard, including a tour during Operation Iraqi Freedom. "It cements and reaffirms your commitment to your country to make sure the memorials that depict our history and the sacrifices made by those who came before us stay intact." 🐻



Above: Artilleryman Herbert Beaver, killed in action in France, is interred in Wahoo after the war. Left to right: A Lincoln man shows his contempt for the Kaiser. A tank draws crowds to a Liberty Loan drive in Wahoo. Memorial Stadium in Lincoln was dedicated to a Cornhusker football star killed in the war. Next page, a massive crowd fills downtown Omaha for a victory parade following Germany's surrender in November 1918.

