

World War I

As I was researching for information on a World War I memorial in our Nation's Capital, I found none. However, I did learn a lot about the war. First on April 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson went before a joint session of Congress and asked for a declaration of war upon the German Empire. Following votes of 82 to 6 in the Senate and 373 to 50 in the House, the US officially declared war on April 6, 1917, 100 years ago last week. It appears that Wilson and Congress followed the Constitution in the war declaration. This followed three years of neutrality declared by President Wilson. My high school history teacher taught us that the war started in Sarajevo, Bosnia, where Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was shot to death along with his wife Sophie by Serbian Gavrilo Princip on June 28, 1914. Princip and other nationalists were struggling to end Austro-Hungarian rule over Bosnia and Herzegovina. Several political moves followed with Russia, Belgium, France, Great Britain and Serbia lining up against Austria-Hungary and Germany, and World War I had begun. Isn't it interesting that there was unrest in the Balkans back then?

Germany began fighting World War I on two fronts, invading France through neutral Belgium in the west and confronting mighty Russia in the east. Apparently Hitler forgot the lessons of WWI when he also fought two fronts, including an invasion of Russia that turned into a disaster.

In February 1917, Congress passed a \$250 million arms appropriations bill intended to make the United States ready for war. On June 26, 1917 the first 14,000 U.S. infantry troops landed in France to begin training for combat. When the war finally ended, on November 11, 1918, more than two million American soldiers, including Adolph Bakke, my father served on the battlefields of Western Europe, and about 50,000 of them lost their lives.

The young Winston Churchill, then first lord of the British Admiralty, resigned his command in 1916, accepting a commission with an infantry battalion in France.

The war ended on different dates for the countries fighting. An Arab revolt combined to destroy the Ottoman economy and devastate its land, and the Turks signed a treaty with the Allies in late October 1918. Austria-Hungary, reached an armistice on November 4. Facing dwindling resources on the battlefield, discontent on the home front and the surrender of its allies, Germany was finally forced to seek an armistice on November 11, 1918, ending World War I also known as the War to End All Wars.

Many of the technologies we now associate with military conflict, machine guns, tank, aerial combat and radio communications were introduced during World War I. Also introduced in World War I was the use of chemical weapons. The Geneva Protocol, signed in 1925, restricted the use of chemical and biological agents in warfare. Apparently no one told Bashar al-Assad.