



Senator Matt Bartle – Serving Jackson County

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Veterans Day: The Battle for Vauquois Heights

Shrouded in darkness, the soldiers of the 35th Division waited in tense anticipation. Before them lay Vauquois Heights on the Hindenburg Line, guarded by battle-hardened German soldiers sheltered behind rolls of barbed-wire and concealed within a honeycomb of concrete fortifications. Beyond that lay heavily fortified Charpentry and Cheppy (deemed by the French Army to be unassailable). The ground over which they were to advance was a moonscape ravaged by four years of some of the most horrific warfare in recorded history, with every inch guarded by a network of machine guns backed up by heavy artillery that commanded the high ground of the Argonne.

The night air of September 26, 1918, was suddenly filled with the sound of an immense allied bombardment from 2,600 guns, which shook the very ground on which they stood. At 5:30 a.m. the order came and the men of the 35th (made up primarily of young Missouri National Guard troops) poured out of their trenches. They advanced quickly, shrouded by a dense fog that had appeared over the battlefield (attributed by the commanding general to the hand of Providence). In less than an hour, they had taken Vauquois Heights and were pressing on, but German resistance stiffened and they began to take heavy casualties.¹

With remarkable courage, these soldiers slogged on through barbed wire, murderous machine gun fire and the blasts of large artillery rounds. Over the next six days, they managed to take their objectives (aided in part by the daring courage of a young artillery spotter named Harry S. Truman, who called in accurate fire on German gun emplacements), but the cost was tremendous.² More than 4,500 Missourians had been wounded and 675 were killed (this 40 percent casualty rate was reportedly the highest of any American division in the war).³

Back home in Missouri, the new State Capitol was under construction (the former Capitol having been destroyed by fire). A young French painter was commissioned to

decorate the building with a painting depicting the exploits of brave Missourians involved in World War I. When he petitioned the French military for permission to use one of their aerodromes to create the immense painting (stretching 50 feet long by 20 feet high)⁴, he was asked who the work was for. When told, the general replied, “it will cost you nothing, for we remember the Missouri Thirty-fifth who broke the Hindenburg line where we had spent four years and forty thousand men. . . . Only you must put into the faces of those boys the courage that carried them through.”⁵

Next week we celebrate Veterans Day, which originally commemorated the end of that devastating war on November 11, 1918. This day now commemorates not only the sacrifice of those who served in World War I, but also every veteran who has worn the uniform of our country. In small tribute to the sacrifices of those who have so nobly served, this past session the Missouri Legislature passed several new laws to honor our veterans. These include:

- Allowing a dependent of a military member who resides in Missouri and whose parent is assigned to permanent duty in Missouri to be eligible for in-state tuition at state colleges and universities.
- Allowing veterans displaying Congressional Medal of Honor, Prisoner of War, Purple Heart or Silver Star special licenses plates, or Bronze Star placards, to park for free in metered parking spaces, upon city approval.
- Providing a state income tax exemption for any military retirement benefits. The exemption would increase by 15 percent annually beginning in 2010 until it is fully implemented at 100 percent in 2016. It also removes the age requirement for the current tax exemption phase-in on publicly funded retirement benefits, allowing all Missourians receiving public pensions—including veterans—to take part in the income tax exemption.

Below you will find a photograph of the artwork mentioned above, as well as a complete list of source citations for the column.



“Glory of Missouri in War”

This massive painting by Charles Hoffbauer depicts Missouri troops in World War I. The painting can be found in the Missouri House of Representatives chamber in the Capitol.



“Vauquois Heights”

Painted by Adolphe Blondheim, this lunette depicts the battle involving the 35th Division. This painting is located in the Capitol’s Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Museum, located in the central area of the eastern end of the second floor. It is one in a series of eight lunettes portraying the activities of Missouri in war.

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¹ Walter B. Stevens, *Centennial History of Missouri (The Center State): One Hundred Years in the Union 1820–1921* (St. Louis–Chicago: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1921), 891–898.

² Edward G. Lengel, *To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne, 1918 The Epic Battle That Ended the First World War* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2008), 138.

³ Stevens, 897.

⁴ Neil C. Cockerline, "Regional News," *WAAC Newsletter* Volume 17, Number 3 (1995)

⁵ *The Missouri State Capitol: A Collection of Historic Information about its Architectural Design* (1979), 90–93.