Volume I, Chapter 2

Out of Isolation

From home to hell – The journey from America’s cities and farms to European battlefields

Jared Morris
The chapter is a look at the contrast between the perceived comfort in the isolation of a boy and his family, as well as the perceived comfort of the isolation of a country from world affairs, with the complete discomfort and hell of a journey overseas to fight and die in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Fight and die for a family and a country that are no longer isolated, no longer “safe” from the world.

Section 1

Introduction


Notes from the 1920s about headstone engravings.


A still from the film. Young Ralph plays with a toy gun.
In my experience, in order for individuals to really care about something, they must connect with it on a personal level. While getting some cool winter air one January night at my home in rural Virginia, I stared out into the dark and silent trees. I had a feeling of complete security. I had a feeling of isolation from the troubles of the outside world. I felt fortunate. I felt unworthy. Why was I able to have this comfort? Why did I possess this feeling of well-being, and what if it all was taken away from me? What if my world was tossed into an unfamiliar, unpredictable hell? It was at that moment that I realized my mission for the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) “Bringing the War Home” project. I would personalize the contrast. I would find an American family with a son who fought in World War I. I would focus my time and research on bringing their boy to “life.” I would find a boy who probably felt secure and isolated, as I did that January night. I would find a boy who was called from his family, and his comfort, to die a man in the mud in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive.
What did the journey consist of for one actual individual American doughboy? What was the experience of a boy who grew up in an isolated nation and went from his home to fight and die during the Meuse-Argonne offensive?
Just 30 years removed from the American Civil War, Ralph E. Weiler was born on October 16, 1895, to parents, George and Louisa of Hanover, Pennsylvania. Like many individuals living in “Pennsylvania Dutch” country, George and Louisa had parents who had emigrated from Germany. George worked as a cigar maker, and by the time of the 1900 census, the family was renting a house with two boys at school and young Ralph at home with Louisa.

As the decade unfolded, the Russo-Japanese War became the first modern military conflict of the twentieth century. The war, February 1904 – September 1905, ended with the Treaty of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, which was brokered by Theodore Roosevelt. Although the terms of the treaty did not award the Japanese what they may have hoped, it was a clear military victory for Japan. Russia’s naval fleet was now limited and her prestige had been reduced considerably. This was the first defeat of a European power by an Asian power in the modern era, and it emboldened the German Empire.

When the census men gathered their information in the year 1910, Ralph was fourteen. His family was growing. George and Louisa added four young daughters, giving them a total of seven children. The two oldest boys were still living at home, but they were working for wages. William worked as a telephone operator, while Raymond worked for a local baker. Ralph, however, was too young and still attended school, as did the two older of his sisters. All the children of an appropriate age were able to read and write. The family lived in their rented house and continued on as any other would.

On the larger stage, in 1907, the British negotiated away what had been referred to as her “splendid isolation.” They bound themselves to their age-old enemies, the French, as well as France’s old foe, Czarist Russia. This was the result of an obvious growth in German militarism and a wariness of the plans and ambitions of Kaiser Wilhelm II, who had already established a similar alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy, known as the “Triple Alliance.” With France, Britain, and Russia, the Triple Entente was formed with a guarantee of a “moral obligation” to assist each other in the event of conflict. At this point the pieces were set, and in August of 1914 Europe erupted into war with machines and men killing and destroying. For three years, on the
other side of the Atlantic, President Woodrow Wilson proudly kept America isolated from the horrific issue.

In June 1917, twenty-one-year-old Ralph E. Weiler received his draft notice as did his middle brother, Raymond. Ralph was taller than his older brother with light brown hair and a slender build. Raymond was unemployed at the time and applied for exemption due to physical disability. This exemption, however, does not appear to have registered with the draft board. Raymond did serve from 1917 to 1919 and lived out his life in the town he grew up in until the end of World War II. Ralph’s story, however, is different. When Ralph received his notice he was working as a laborer for a man named Ike Blumenthal. Still a single man, he left his father, mother, and four younger sisters, and headed off for training.

Prior to the draft, the Germans promised to reinstate unrestricted submarine warfare, tipping the scales and forcing Wilson and the U.S. out of their isolated position. The discovery of the Zimmerman Note, considered one of the greatest intelligence events of all time, was the key the British needed to unlock a plentiful, yet green, reservoir of American men and material. On April 2, 1917, President Wilson addressed congress, concluding that the United States must help make the world “safe for democracy.” The United States declared war on Germany four days later. America sent its sons to the cries and carnage that had laid waste to so many and so much.

As the country began to mobilize, the country was informed that General John Pershing would lead the American effort against the Kaiser. This was a difficult task considering he would be leading green troops across the Atlantic to work with British and French troops who had been fighting for close to four years. “Blackjack” Pershing was adamant about two key aspects of the American Expeditionary Force. The Americans were to fight as an independent unit. He did not want American soldiers to be used as spot replacements for already formed French and British regiments. The second non-negotiable was that the Americans would be “on-the-move” in battle and rely on the rifle and bayonet. They would not en-trench and wait. It was in this context that the Americans found themselves in Northern France on September 26, 1918. In the words of Edward G. Lengel (2008):

The rain stopped a few hours before dawn on September 26. As the black screen of clouds parted overhead, moonlight illuminated long rows of artillery waiting silently behind the American lines. As if the moon had given the signal, officers leapt from dugouts, raced to their crowded batteries, and shouted orders.
It was the beginning of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, the largest American attack of World War I.

Private Ralph E. Weiler, 328th infantry regiment of the 82nd All-American division, found himself deep behind the German lines on October 8, 1918. He, along with 16 other “doughboys,” was attempting to flank a German machine gun nest. “As the little American detachment continued through the woods down the ridge’s far slope, two Germans wearing Red Cross bands jumped out the bushes and ran like ‘scared rabbits.’” (Lengel 2008, 280). The men shot at, then chased after, the two frightened medics. As they pushed through the thicket, the Americans stumbled upon a group of Prussians with their guns stacked as they ate breakfast. These Prussians had recently arrived in support. As the unarmed Prussians started to raise their hands in surrender, a hidden German machine gun nest opened fire on Private Weiler and his fellow soldiers. Germans and Americans fell to this barrage. In an instant, six Americans lay dead; Private R.E. Weiler from North Street, Hanover, Pennsylvania, was among them.

The events that would ensue immediately following the gunning down of these men is a story that is probably more familiar in the American World War I narrative. It involves another small town boy. He was called from his isolated life in rural Tennessee to the horrors of France, and after watching his buddies die in the mud, Alvin York took on a multitude of Germans soldiers, the event leading to unwanted fame and haunting him the rest of his life.

From these events on October 8, the entire offensive continued. Never “digging in” for too long, the doughboys pushed the Germans further and further back until they submitted on November 11, 1918.

Like York and Weiler, thousands of boys were called from isolation across the United States to such unimaginable circumstances in the Argonne. Many of these young men did not make it back, and yet, for all that was lost in those 47 days, it seems as if nobody remembers. This was a loss of 26,000 boys, without a chance to live, laugh, and cry. The hell that they encountered was unimaginable. We talk about Gettysburg and we talk about D-day, both tremendous battles with high stakes and great loss of life. The Meuse-Argonne should take its seat among them. Without this final push in the fall of 1918, it is hard to say what the outcome might have been for the Allies and the world. It is time we give this event and these men their rightful place in our national memory. 14,000 of the American Meuse-Argonne dead are still in France. They rest in Romagne among their buddies and brothers. Many, like Private R.E. Weiler, lie and wait. They wait for a visitor to stroll by and read their names, bringing them back to life, even if just for the moment.
“I think I understand what military fame is; to be killed on the field of battle and have your name misspelled in the newspapers.” William Tecumseh Sherman
Once I made the decision to create a short historical fiction film based on Private R.E.W’s life, the writing of the script began. After some tweaks and pops along the way, I decided I wanted to display four stages of his life. The sequences would not only show the growth of the boy into a young man, but also the larger events that were pulling the world and the country into horrific war.

The next step was to find a cast that could portray three different aged “Ralphs,” and two or three different aged “Katherines.” Initially, I was not planning on playing the role of older Ralph. It wasn’t until the week of shooting that we realized we were running out of options. I talked with my co-director and audio/visual man and we decided to go ahead and have me play the roles of “draft” and “war” Ralph. I cut my hair the next day and cut my beard the first day of filming. The filming, audio, and editing commenced.

The author’s transformation.

Ralph E. Weiler
Out of Isolation: The film’s final cut.
Out of Isolation: in French.
How to Use This Chapter in 30 Minutes

Lesson Plan: War and Family
This is a quick activity to connect students to how war might affect family and loved ones. Students will warm-up with discussion about their own family, watch a short World War I film about Private Ralph E. Weiler and his sister, and then answer and discuss follow-up questions.

Guiding Questions
1. How does war affect the one who is leaving his family and how does it affect those left behind?

Teacher Planning

Time Required
30 minutes

Materials Needed
Projector and computer to show film

Out of Isolation short film

Activities
1. 5 minute warm-up for students: List three things that are fun/exciting/interesting about you and your family.
2. Ask the students to share the three items with their neighbors if they so wish.
3. Students watch the short film “Out of Isolation.”
4. Students answer the following questions on a sheet of paper:
   4.1. How would you feel if you were Catherine and your brother was leaving for war?
   4.2. How would you feel if you were Ralph and you were leaving your family to go to a foreign country to fight?
5. Students share and discuss their reflections.

Assessment
Assess students based on their class discussion.

Modifications
There is a version of the short film in French. This could be used as a cross-curricular activity.
How to Use this chapter in 60 minutes

Lesson Plan: The Human Connection
The lesson centers on researching an American soldier who fought in World War I. The research used in this lesson creates a connection to the individual and the time period. It also helps to build historical researching skills.

Guiding Questions
1. Who is buried at the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery in Romagne, France?

2. What were the circumstances and significance surrounding the death of one of these soldiers?

Learning Outcomes
The student will be able to:

1. navigate the American Battle Monuments Commission website.

2. research individuals using online primary and secondary source documents.

3. create a profile of a soldier buried at the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery.

Teacher Planning

Time Required
60 minutes

Materials Needed
Computers with internet access

American Armies and Battlefields in Europe (Blue Book)

Maps of Meuse-Argonne Offensive from the Blue Book (PDF)

Soldier Profile Handout

Human Connection Slideshow
Activities

Use the slide show throughout the activities that follow.

1. Opening Bell Ringer: Show the class the short story about the changing of Pvt. Weiler’s grave stone at the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery. This is a clear example of how primary source research can affect the present day and of how history is a process.

2. Either in pairs or individually, have the students access the American Battle Monuments Commission website. Click on the “Search ABMC Burials” tab.

3. Have them filter their search to “WWI” and “Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery.”

4. Have them begin their search. (Some students like to try to find their last name or they might even have a relative buried there.)

5. I find that allowing students to dive into this search with some guidance can be very positive and exciting, however, depending on the needs of the classroom, the following are “noteworthy” soldiers buried in Romagne, France at the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery:
   a. Freddie Stowers
   b. Frank Luke
   c. Fred Smith
   d. Matej Kocak

6. Students can also use a search engine like Google. They can enter their soldier’s name and his unit or division to narrow the search. This can lead to further information and leads.

7. Using date of death and division, students can use the Blue Book Map to try to figure out the possible circumstances surrounding their soldier’s death. The map includes division numbers, as well as, dates. Although they might not get a clear reason, they can surely hypothesize about where and why based on division histories and the location of the division on the day of the soldier’s death.

8. Throughout the process, the “Profile Sheet” should be used as a tool to record information, and then finally completed to show the students’ work.

9. The final product is a connection to a human being who lived a 100 years ago and is interred in a cemetery a half a world away. The student develops a connection to the war and a time often overlooked in our history.

10. To close the lesson, have students share the information and discoveries they have made with the class.

Assessment

Assess students based on their “Soldier’s Profile” sheet and their sharing with the class.
Modifications

Extensions
This can extend much further than the “Profile Sheet.” Teachers can extend this research and have students create oral reports, short films, collaborative presentations, etc.

Lesson Plan: The Story of the Sources
This lesson utilizes the primary sources behind one actual soldier’s journey from his small world in Pennsylvania to his death in France. The lesson also includes a live-action short film to correspond with the soldier’s journey.

Guiding Questions
1. How does war affect the one who is leaving his/her family?
2. How does it affect those left behind?

Teacher Planning

Time Required
60 minutes

Materials Needed
Projector and computer for showing the short film “Out of Isolation”

“Out of Isolation” short film

Primary Sources

Tap or click the preview image to view the document.

Story of the Sources Slideshow

Use this slideshow with the lesson.

Activities
1. Give students, either in groups or individually, the eight primary sources pertaining to Private Ralph E. Weiler, out of order.
2. Have students examine the sources and answer the following questions for each:
   a. What type of primary source is this?
   b. To whom is the source pertaining?
   c. When was the source created?
3. Have students place the eight sources in chronological order.
4. Discuss the proper chronological order as a class using the slide show.
   a. Picture of Hanover, Pa – R.E.W.’s Hometown
   b. 1900 Census
   c. 1910 Census
   d. 1917 Draft Card
   e. Camp Lee, Virginia – World War I Training Camp
   g. Picture of American Soldiers in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive
   h. Tombstone for Ralph – photo taken in July 2014

Why and How Ralph E. Weiler’s Headstone Was Changed

This video explains the research and process of correcting Weiler's headstone.

4. Watch the short film “Out of Isolation,” which is historical fiction based around, among others, the sources the sources examined by the students.

5. Following the film, have students answer the following questions.
   a. How would you feel if you were the young man leaving his sister and family to head off to war?
   b. How would you feel if you were the sister, and you had to say farewell to your brother?

6. Lead the students in discussion about their reaction to the film.

Assessment
Assess students on their chronology activity, oral and written reflections, and class discussion.

Extensions
There is a version of the short film in French. This could be used as a cross-curricular activity.

If you look carefully, the documents do not match the tombstone. The video at left tells the story of how this was changed.

Students could create period postcards and write to their actual brother/sister/mother/father.
Out of Isolation: The Journey

This video offers a behind-the-scenes look at how Out of Isolation was made.

How a Headstone Is Changed

This video demonstrates how a headstone is corrected and replaced.

Americans Visiting Romagne

Two American college students discuss what they have learned from a World War I tour in France.

This is a detailed account of American involvement in the First Great War. This includes statistics, photographs, and maps. Any serious research on World War I would be incomplete without this resource. This is a detailed account of American involvement in the First Great War. This includes statistics, photographs, and maps. Any serious research on World War I would be incomplete without this resource.


This article was vital in my research of Private R. E. Weiler.


The burials database provides a comprehensive listing of service men and women buried overseas. The listings include branch of service, regiment, division, state, conflict, and place of interment.


This was invaluable to my research into individual soldiers and their families. Numerous pathways to copies of various primary sources, such as, census data, draft cards, death certificates, etc.


This is a collection of documents relating to American diplomacy from the American Revolution to the present day. The author gives insight to each document as an introduction to the actual document. It is a convenient
resource when studying America’s foreign relations and policies.


This book is referred to as the “authoritative” account of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive of 1918. It reads like a story and gives fascinating first-hand accounts all while telling the larger story of the battle.


This is a look at many situations and conflicts that took place in what is now the periphery of history. Many of the events and possible events in this book are overlooked in the grand scheme of the American story.
Introduction
Dark Classical Music

Black and white footage of soldiers, families, bodies, cemetery, barbed wire, guns, boats

Out of Isolation
Violin music and a quote by a soldier, then black and white footage of war.

Girl’s voice: 30 years removed from the devastating War Between the States, my brother was born the third son of George and Louise, in the southern Pennsylvania township of Hanover. Poppa was the son of German immigrants and was a skilled cigar maker. And except for the three boys playing at Mama’s side life was quiet and good for the growing family.

Footage shows a young boy playing was in the woods he is then pretending to be shot and killed.

Man’s voice: As the decade unfolded the Russo-Japanese war became the first major, modern military event of the century. The win by the Japanese crippled Russia’s fleet as well as its international prestige, emboldening the German empire even further. (Footage shows war scenes)

Footage shows that the little boy has grown up and there is a girl skipping around the farm.

Girl’s voice: By the time he was fourteen, I had come along as well as three other sisters. Like our family, Hanover was growing as well, near 7,000 souls. William and Raymond were already young men by that time. They occupied themselves with working for wages and chasing sweethearts but Ralph was ours. Still young enough to play and so very protective of us.

Little Girl: How are dogs and trees alike?

Boy: How?

Little Girl: They both lose their bark when they die.

Boy: What is brown and sticky? A stick silly!

Man’s voice: Meanwhile, German militarism, and the growth of her navy lead to the binding of Britain, France, and Russia in what would become known as the Triple Entente.
Girl’s Voice: When he received his draft card he was still living with the family and working as a day laborer for Mr. Blumenthal. Times were tight but I didn’t mind. I still enjoyed having my big brother around. We weren’t shocked with the news but like most families in our little world on North Street we thought the trouble and danger was simply too far away to reach us. We sat as we did when we were little we sat.

Girl: I’m scared

Young Man: Just think of it as a vacation to France.

Girl: France! Do you think you will get to see Paris?

Young Man: Most likely, I’ll even bring you back a hummingbird hat.

Girl’s Voice: It helped to think of it as a short vacation, that my brother would return with his smile and case full of French treasures but news from Europe was and ever reliable slap that shook me to my reality.

Girl: Hey! Don’t you forget my hummingbird hat.

Young Man salutes the girl and she waves.

Man: The promise of unrestricted submarine warfare bends President Wilson and he dives from his isolate position to one of war and mobility. The U.S. enters the war in Europe. America would sends her sons to the cries and carnage that have laid waste to so many and so much.

Man: In the early hours of September 26, 1918 the largest American offensive of the first Great War commenced. The goal was to cut off the German second army leaving it unable to resupply or be reinforced.

It was in the Great Meuse-Argonne offensive that my brother found himself on the morning of October 8, 1918. As the day unfolded, my brother along with 16 other men were deep in the thick of it. Hundreds of yards behind the German lines they gave chase to two German medics who had spotted the 17 wayward doughboys. As they pushed through the brush the Americans stumbled upon a group of Prussians with their guns stacked as they ate breakfast. As the unarmed Prussians began to raise their hands in surrender a hidden German machine gun nest opened fire on my brother and his fellow soldiers. Germans and Americans fell to this barrage. 6 Americans lay dead, my brother among them. For all that was lost it feels as if no one remembers. 26,000 boys in one battle without a chance to live, laugh, and cry. I used to run with my brother, I use to laugh with my brother, I use to talk with my brother, now I cry for my brother. In my mind he lives by stream, still playing, still laughing.
Why and How Ralph E. Weiler’s Headstone Was Changed
Ralph E. Weiler was killed on Oct 8, 1918. His headstone had an error in the spelling of his name, after some quick primary source research the wheels moved quickly to remedy the mistake.

The footage shows the marker being corrected.

Ok, so um, right now, I am walking up to Private Ralph Weiler’s gravesite. It’s a pretty neat feeling. Pretty powerful feeling to know that researching Private Weiler, I guess you could say some corrections, in his history and his remembrance and that I’ve had a small impact or played a small part in that. So, we are walking up right now and they are going to be changing the stone. I’m… it’s pretty, pretty cool.

The footage shows the uncorrected marker.

So as you can see behind me, I’m a little out of breath actually because, I, I saw the little cart up here and I started sprinting because I definitely didn’t want to miss this. Anyways, as you can see behind me they have removed Ralph’s incorrect stone and his proper stone is leaning against the cart there and soon to be placed above his grave.

The stone has been set. They put cement bottom, and then wait for that to dry and then they will pack the dirt back up. They were pretty pleased that we were here to watch them do their work, their service, and they even wanted a picture taken with Mike and I which we thought was cool. Good Stuff.

The footage shows Mike taking pictures of the stone, the picture of the men with Jared, the corrected stone, the cemetery.

Out of Isolation: The Journey
Music, photos of families, scenes from filming the first isolation movie, still shots from the first isolation movie Jared used to open the chapter with their locations.

Shots of Chetel-Chehery, France

Man speaking in French on the street, scenery and still shots from the trip to France

How a Headstone Is Changed
This footage shows how Ralph E. Weiler’s marker was corrected after an error on it was discovered. There is a machine moving in fast motion shaping the new cross. The film is grainy and black and white.

The footage is then changed to color but is still in fast motion. There are two men who are very carefully removing Weiler’s incorrect marker from the gravesite and then replacing it with a new one.
Americans Visiting Romagne

Jared: Ok, If you would like to introduce yourself

Valerie: My name is Valerie Cousins

Jacqueline: And I’m Jacqueline Zacharia

Jared: And you are here from…

Valerie: Massachusetts

Jared: Now, from what I gather, you guys are here on a World War I tour.

Valerie: Yep, with our schools.

Jared: From Salem State

Jacqueline: And North Shore

Jared: Ok, so from your experience so far, and I believe you have been here six days…

Jacqueline: Yeah, today is our sixth day

Valerie: Um.. Yeah

Jared: Um… what would you say, how would you describe your experience development on your contentt knowledge of World War I so far?

Valerie: It has definitely expanded

Jacqueline: Absolutely. We didn’t realize the extent of the loss and the pain that… you know…

Valerie: I just think it is one of those things where we don’t learn about it that much in America because we weren’t that involved until much later in the war so it’s so huge here in Europe but you don’t get that, like you don’t get the impact of the war, like you do over here.

Jared: What is your impression on maybe the American impact on World War I.

Jacqueline: It’s overwhelming. It’s very. Very overwhelming. You can see how many soldiers we sent out and this is only one cemetery, there are so many more and this is the biggest.

Valerie: I really like the cemetery, so I chose in college to take more classes on it but I feel like in high school, I feel like there might be a little ignorance because they, we don’t, they breeze by it in history…

Jacqueline: It’s overlooked.

Valerie: It’s, It’s, it’s just like this is what happened but that’s it, they don’t, like again, because America wasn’t involved until the last year and a half of the war.

Jared: Now you guys are going to be teachers, or are you …

Valerie: I’m actually a theatre major, but a history minor.
Jared: A theatre major, history minor, ok

Valerie: Yeah…

Jared: And…

Jacqueline: I’m going into criminal investigation.

Jared: Criminal investigation.. um, well thank you guys, I appreciate your time.
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