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One American Time-Traveler, 100 Years  
Since the Great War, 500 Miles of Battle-Scarred  
French Countryside, and Too Many Trenches,  
Shells, Legends and Ghosts to Count



RICHARD RUBIN

**Back Over There: One American Time-Traveler,  
100 years Since the Great War, 500 Miles of  
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*Richard Rubin*

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# **Back Over There: One American Time-Traveler, 100 years Since the Great War, 500 Miles of Battle-Scarred French Countryside, and Too Many Trenches, Shells, Legends, and Ghosts to Count**

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In *The Last of the Doughboys*, Richard Rubin introduced readers to a forgotten generation of Americans: the men and women who fought and won the First World War. Interviewing the war's last survivors face-to-face, he knew well the importance of being present if you want to get the real story. But he soon came to realize that to get the whole story, he had to go Over There, too. So he did, and discovered that while most Americans regard that war as dead and gone, to the French, who still live among its ruins and memories, it remains very much alive.

Years later, with the centennial of the war only magnifying this paradox, Rubin decided to go back Over There to see if he could, at last, resolve it. For months he followed the trail of the American Expeditionary Forces on the Western Front, finding trenches, tunnels, bunkers, century-old graffiti and ubiquitous artifacts. But he also found an abiding fondness for America and Americans, and a colorful corps of local after-hours historians and archaeologists who tirelessly explore these sites and preserve the memories they embody while patiently waiting for Americans to return and reclaim their own history and heritage. None of whom seemed to mind that his French needed work.

Based on his wildly popular New York Times series, *Back Over There* is a timely journey, in turns reverent and iconoclastic but always fascinating, through a place where the past and present are never really separated.

**Back Over There: One American Time-Traveler, 100 years Since the Great War, 500 Miles of Battle-Scarred French Countryside, and Too Many Trenches, Shells, Legends, and Ghosts to Count Details**

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## **From Reader Review Back Over There: One American Time-Traveler, 100 years Since the Great War, 500 Miles of Battle-Scarred French Countryside, and Too Many Trenches, Shells, Legends, and Ghosts to Count for online ebook**

### **Susan Liston says**

Interesting saga of the author's pursuit of WWI sites in France. I wish he could go back and retrace his steps and film it all. Fascinating how you can still go back and find yourself a live shell in the ground with barely any effort. One hundred years and another war notwithstanding. His passion for this subject is palpable. As example, after seeing graffiti carved by American soldiers sheltering in a chalk mine, he researched every single one and found out what became of them.

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### **Don Heiman says**

In 2017 author Richard Rubin published his beautiful World War 1 travel book "Back Over There". The book focuses on his tour of famous WW1 French battlefields at Verdun and the Argonne region, to mention a few. His book explains the importance of meeting local citizens who live and work in the areas that are sacred battlefield sites. The recount of Rubin's visits in France deeply influenced my understanding of World War 1 and the beautiful people who continue 100 years later to be personally affected by the War's history.  
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### **Jdblair says**

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. Mr. Rubin took me on a comprehensive tour of the areas where the American Expeditionary Force operated in 1917 & 1918. The book makes me want to tour the areas that he writes about and meet some of the wonderful people who assisted him in his search for information. If I am able to do that, it sounds like I need to take a course in conversational French before making the trip! If there was anything I would change about the book would be to add a few color photos and maps.

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### **Lucy Meeker says**

Very comprehensive and enlightening. Highly recommended for military readers of WW1.

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### **Jim says**

Back Over There, by Richard Rubin, took me back to a region of France I had visited in 2007 while exploring the area where my maternal grandfather had served in 1918-1919 with the American Expeditionary Forces. I had a variety of ephemera from his actual stay there and had researched photos,

maps, and accounts in my genealogical research. Back Over There took me back to some of the exact spots visited by Rubin but provided much more insight to the surrounding area. My grandfather served in the St. Mihiel Salient area and Mr. Rubin's book expanded the area of my previous visit. I'm looking forward to returning in 2018, 100 years after my grandfather's service began. Since he died when I was only 7, I had no opportunity to ask him about "The Great War". In fact, I didn't even know what the Great War was at that time. With Back Over There and a return visit, I'm hoping to learn more about my grandfather in a very unique way - a way that none of my cousins (there were 16 of us from my grandparents' seven children) and I were able to experience at the time since we were between 1 and 15 when he died.

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### **Julie says**

A bit drier than I thought it would be. I love the topic of World War I, however, I was looking for more of a "people angle" than just straight up military facts and information.

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### **Doug Gordon says**

Best book I've read on the American involvement in World War I in a long time, if ever. It's a great story of traveling along the remnants of the Western Front in northeastern France, and is written with just the right touch of humor as the author encounters other WWI historians, collectors, and military buffs. I was surprised to find out how much is still out there -- some of it quite dangerous -- and how well it is remembered by the people who live there today.

Highly recommended no matter how much or how little you know about this important conflict, which shaped our modern world and which was not really over until the end of WWII.

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### **Chris Csergei says**

This book provides some interesting color to the first world war and what the soldiers had to go through, while also enlightening us on the current state of these lands. Sort of a cross between a travel log and a history book, it doesn't really impress on either. Not really worth the read.

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### **Jack H. says**

We are now in the midst of the centenary of the "War to End All Wars." Some one hundred years after the end of the First World War, Richard Rubin traveled to the fields and towns of Belgium and Northern France to see for himself the places where it all occurred. Author of 2013's "The Last of the Doughboys," Rubin comes to this study already well-versed and well-provisioned by the wide collection of first-hand interviews with the last few Americans veterans of that war, accounts which formed the source of Rubin's 2013 book.

Over the course of several years, Rubin made a number of trips to France, particularly to its northeastern corner, the area known as the Meuse-Argonne. It was in this sector of the Western Front--that colossal line of trenches and fortifications running from the coast of Belgium to Switzerland--that U.S. troops came into

their own during the last few months of World War I. Americans may be surprised to learn that, one hundred years later, artifacts and reminders of the presence of the “doughboys,” the GIs of World War I, can often be found with little difficulty in this part of France. Perhaps even more amazingly, so can a longstanding affection—if not outright love—for America and her troops' sacrifices of one hundred years ago.

One of the most powerful and touching illustrations of this is provided by Madame George, an elderly woman, who helped Rubin locate the memorial to the last U.S. soldier killed on the Western Front, a man who literally died at the eleventh hour on November 11, 1918. When one of Mme. George's friends tells Rubin that he was lucky to have found Mme. George, as no other local resident would have been as helpful as she was, Mme. George poignantly responds: “I would not forget that you helped us recover our liberty. History and memory are very important to me.”

Much the same sense of the importance of history and memory can be said of many of the cast of characters in “Back Over There.” From knowledgeable local residents, to Dutch and Belgian retirees who have chosen to move to the region, to U.S. expatriates working for the American Battle Monuments Commission (the federal organization chartered with care of overseas U.S. military cemeteries), Rubin encounters a wide range of people in his travels across the former Western Front. While many of these people met by Rubin come across as knowledgeable and as focused as trained historians, some others come across as people obsessed with, and almost “hyper” about, a rather grim, if unique, hobby: battlefield tourism.

Make no mistake: the areas explored in this book—which is a combination of travelogue and living history, meshed with a cultural exploration of war and remembrance after a century—are, as Rubin describes them, not “sites where battles once took place,” but “battle sites.” The number of times that Rubin reports nearly tripping over unexploded shells in his forays through the woods of the Meuse-Argonne region demonstrate that World War I battlefield tourism is not for the faint of heart. Likewise, Rubin encounters other, more gruesome finds: the portholes of death (for lack of a better word) found in the Ossuary at Verdun, overlooking crypts filled with the bones of thousands of dead soldiers, is but one grim example.

Another eerie scene is painted by Rubin’s exploration of a vast underground village, carved into ancient chalk mines underneath a French ridgeline, the Chemin des Dames. This still bears today the legible carvings, doodles and earnest “don’t forget me”-type etchings of long-dead doughboys, as they waited to go into battle for the first time against the Germans’ dreaded machine guns and stormtroops. Rubin’s identification of many of these works of graffiti with specific soldiers—and their later, often tragic fates—makes for haunting reading. As a result, some of these have a deeply poignant, *memento mori* sense about them.

Rubin’s saga of his forays and explorations from one row of trenches and blockhouses to another makes several facts saliently clear. First, much of the landscape of the Meuse-Argonne area is in many respects largely unchanged from what the doughboys saw and faced one hundred years ago, and the battlefields are preserved better than U.S. Civil War battlefields. One can barely kick a foot without stirring up bullets, buttons or other remnants of war, it seems. To that point: the presence of so many unexploded munitions (some still being filled with poison gas) may help see to that state of suspended animation that lingers over so many of the combat sites of the Great War. Lastly, the presence to this day of those imposing and well-constructed fortifications helps demonstrate why the First World War was so protracted and the Allies’ efforts to crack these defensive works was so bloody and drawn-out.

One thing also shines forth very clearly from Rubin’s account: the strong feelings of affection felt by many of the average citizens of France’s Meuse-Argonne region for both individual Americans and the United States. In a time when so many of us have come to think that French-American friendship is just a legend

from the past, many of the locals encountered by Rubin come across as not just delightful people in their own right, but as living tributes to the memory of what America's young and inexperienced doughboys fought for and sacrificed in 1917-18.

This book is well worth the read by the general reader, as well as historians and military enthusiasts, to get a sense of how the horrors of the Western Front have not been forgotten a century later in a large region of France, and as well, how the appreciation of many French citizens for America's role in the last days of the "Great War" remains strong. Rubin's work peels back the layers of a hundred years to show modern readers how, in many ways, the battlefields of the First World War remarkably remain much the same as they were, and how easily many of the sights and scenes experienced by the doughboys can still be seen today.

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### **Kristin Strong says**

Four stars instead of five only because the account of actions, American and otherwise, in World War I jumps around in time and place, which makes it hard to keep track of what happened where and when.

Other than that, I LOVED reading this book.

Richard Rubin also wrote "The Last Doughboys", which I've also read and thoroughly enjoyed, wherein he tells the stories of the last survivors of The Great War, whom he met and interviewed in their twilight days. After hearing their stories of battles and comrades and horror and heroism, he became interested in seeing where these brave men -- some of whom weren't old enough to enlist without lying about their ages -- spent their time in France. So off he went.

Rubin tells about his visits to various sites of battles and memorials in eastern France, most of which have connections to American involvement in World War I. You get history, you get brief biographical sketches, you get tales of bravery and terror and trench warfare and artillery bombardments. Rubin visits German and French trenches; military cemeteries for soldiers of many nationalities; monuments to soldiers killed and battles fought; an ossuary; villages that were wiped off the map by the conflict; and German blockhouses and tunnel shelters. He describes how the very landscape was changed by bombs and explosives and remains scarred to this day. He tries to explain the effect the war had on France and its people, and why they have never really recovered from the devastation it wrought.

He also introduces several people who acted as his guides, teachers, and mentors in France and discusses their passion for their studies and their commitment to preserving public memory of World War I and continuing to educate future generations as to its significance and impact.

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This is excellent narrative history, and I look forward to reading more by Richard Rubin -- and to looking up the New York Times series on WWI that he refers to in the book.

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### **Steve says**

An interesting book. The author visits these former battlefields of World War I and tells the stories of the men who fought and died in the trenches. Some of the battlefields was Belleau Wood, the only battle the United States Marine Corps fought during World War I were 1,087 were killed from the 5th and 6th Division and earned the nickname Teufel Hunden by the Germans which means Devil Dogs for their fierceness in combat. The story of the Lost Battalion, the 77th Division led by Major Charles Whittlesey, a lawyer from New York who on October 2, 1918, held the line at the Argonne which was surrounded by the Germans and was greatly outnumbered. A truly remarkable book for those who have an interest in World War I history.

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### **Bob Grove says**

I just finished: "Back Over There". This was a very enjoyable read, even if you do not know a great deal about WWI. The book chronicles Richard Rubin's travels over the battlefields that he discussed in his previous book "The Last of the Doughboys". At times I found Mr. Rubin's adventures very moving. His discussion of the underground chalk mine outside Nanteuil-La-Fosse, where he found Doughboys names inscribed in their own hand, with a brief summary of their fates, was chilling.

Very enjoyable read. I highly recommend

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### **David Hines says**

A few years ago I read Mr. Rubin's Last of the Doughboys about his interviews of the then final remaining American World War I veterans, all over 100 years old, and it was one of the most powerful books on World War I have ever read and continue to highly recommend. In Back Over There, Mr. Rubin tells of his travels to France to visit the remains of World War I trenches and battlefields. It is amazing to learn, that a century on, and after the wreck of World War II, one can still see viable remains of actual World War I trenches, tunnels, and blockhouses with artifacts easily found everywhere, including still live shells. Mr. Rubin weaves a fascinating narrative of meeting French citizens who still hold memories of World War I and who have adopted mastering the history of parts of the World War I battlefields. It seems those in France have a much better memory than most Americans today do for World War I. I found the most moving part of this good book came when Mr. Rubin visited a mine used for shelter in the Great War and found inscriptions left by many doughboys. He then tells what happened to each, some of the stories are heart-breaking. While not as dramatic and intimate as Last of the Doughboys, Back Over there is an equally compelling and unique book much worth reading in this 100th anniversary year of the end of the Great War.

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### **Jim says**

Back in 2013 I read Richard Rubin's first book on WWI titled "The Last of the Doughboys" and really enjoyed it. In that book Rubin described interviewing the last few remaining WWI veterans who were still alive (must to most people's surprise). In "Back Over There," the author goes to France and tours the battlefields of the Western Front of World War I. Both of these books are very timely since we are currently in the one hundred year anniversary of the war.

I have to admit that I am jealous of Richard Rubin. You can tell by his writing that the author truly enjoyed his research. One of my favorite things to do is to walk a battlefield. In "Back Over There" Rubin travels on his own to the ground where battles of the "Great War" happened, not just American Expeditionary Forces but also our allies, the French and British. These battlefields are near the French border with Belgium and Germany, in many cases what is today and was then, in rural areas dotted with small farming villages. Often he makes contact with locals who know the history of the ground as well as any park ranger would at a National Historic Site in the United States. But the majority of the fields that Rubin walks are not protected national parks. They are farm fields where people continue to find artifacts, typically in the form of unexploded ordinance. The interesting thing about Rubin's trip to France is that while we have largely forgotten the battles and sacrifices made by our soldiers WWI, but other nations have not. They continue to. That is evidenced strongly from Rubin's description of the formal remembrance ceremony at Belleau Wood to his interactions with the locals who drop what they are doing to take Rubin on a tour of a battlefield near where they live.

"Back Over There" is an enjoyable read with good pacing. The author seamlessly switches back and forth between historical background and travel narrative. He provides self-deprecating humor in describing his poor French language skills and the occasions where he gets lost looking for the spot where a particular event happened. These are two things that everyone who travels can relate to. So you see that this book is both historical and travel narrative. During this 100-year anniversary of an event that changed the course of history and our standing in the world, "Back Over There" is a good book to read and reflect on. Find out the sacrifices made by us, and more so by our allies. Ask yourself why other nations honor and remember, and are still grateful for what past generations of Americans have done, but we seem to have forgotten.

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### **Andrew says**

I liked the idea of resurrecting memories of WWI 100 years later. I enjoyed learning about a point in history I knew little about. It was mildly frustrating, however because you wound up wishing you were there to see what was being described. (read on kindle and not sure if there were any photos) Reading descriptions of battlefields got a little monotonous. My hat is off to Richard Rubin, however for all his hard work in putting this together

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