316 Lest We Forget

Voiceover: This program is sponsored by BMO Wealth Management, Tyrone and Anne Fahner, Jahn LLC, Reed Smith, the Satter Foundation, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund.

Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is Pritzker Military Presents.

(clap) Clarke: Welcome to Pritzker Military Presents featuring my discussion with historian and award-winning writer and editor Michael Robbins to discuss the Pritzker Military Museum and Library’s latest publication Lest We Forget: The Great War. I’m your host Ken Clarke, and also the executive editor and creative director of Lest We Forget: The Great War. This program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago, and it’s sponsored by BMO Wealth Management, Tyrone and Anne Fahner, Jahn LLC, Reed Smith, the Satter Foundation, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. This program and hundreds more are available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. Published in partnership with the United States World War One Centennial Commission on the occasion of the United States' WWI Centennial, Lest We Forget: The Great War is a tribute to the doughboys and sailors who served and the Allies they fought beside to defeat a deadly enemy. Inspired by the Museum and Library’s robust WWI collection, the book features 166 WWI posters as well as photographs, maps, and a taut narrative by Michael Robbins about the history of the war from 1914 to the 1920s. An official product of the United States World War One Centennial Commission, proceeds from this books will help build the new national WWI memorial in Washington DC. The book’s companion exhibit Lest We Forget: Sailors, Sammies, and Doughboys Over There in World War I at the Museum and Library features an exploration of the United states’ involvement in WWI and the experience of doughboys in the trenches. Michael Robbins served as editor of MHQ the quarterly journal of military magazine and was also editor of Military History Magazine and Autobahn Magazine. He serves as an editor and writer for many of the Museum and Library’s publications. Robbins has a PhD in American History from George Washington University. Please join me in welcoming to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library Michael Robbins. Thank you so much for being here.

(Applause) Robbins: My pleasure.

Clarke: Before we start the discussion, we’re gonna roll a video that will tell you a little bit more about our project over here.

Voiceover: Lest We Forget: The Great War is an illustrated story about WWI, published upon the occasion of the United States' centennial of the Great War. The book is a resource for those who want to learn about this war, the first truly global conflict in history. The war was unprecedented in size, scope, cost, destruction, casualties, and social and economic impact. It quite literally changed our world and the course of our civilization. It destroyed old empires and created whole new nations. Its effects on the many nations that participated and their relationships with each other continue to reverberate today, a century after the final shot was fired. This epic struggle is approached through the powerful and memorable art it spawned and the timely period photographs that illustrate the awful realities of this revolutionary conflict. Most importantly, the book is a tribute to the doughboys and sailors who served and the Allies they fought beside to defeat a resourceful and implacable enemy force. It also serves as a lasting reminder that the world ignores the history of WWI at its peril. Lest We Forget.
Clarke: Well, Michael, when it comes to the topic of WWI, Americans have probably heard about the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. They've probably heard about the American reluctance to join the war, and then the very swift and bloody American entrance into the war that basically led to a very quick resolution of it. However, all of this stuff that happened through the lens of history, it takes on kind of an aura of inevitability. And yet for the leaders of the time, WWI was anything but an inevitable war. Isn't that correct?

Robbins: Yes. Inevitable and unpredictable. One of the drawbacks, if there is one, of history is that in hindsight it always seems inevitable. But it must—in the early summer of 1914 it must have seemed anything but inevitable. No one was really—well, let me revise that. There was a lot of militarism in the air. There had been wars—the Balkan War, the Franco-Prussian War, the Russo-Japanese War. It wasn't that nobody had fired a shot for any, you know, significant period of time. But they—there were some misconceptions of what warfare was at that time in the technological sense and also in terms of just being prepared to actually go ahead a fight a war. It's arguable that the Germans were probably the best prepared, but nobody was really prepared. They didn't have—they had plans. France had its Plan XVII and Germany had its Schlieffen Plan. But the Plan XVII was a terrible idea, and the Schlieffen Plan was derailed almost immediately, almost immediately by its own generals. So it was a time when there was enormous confusion, and I think a lot of the literature has made it very clear that, well, there was this sense of dominoes falling and the war expanding outward. But it really was astounding, the extent to which there was misgiving and doubt. And the Austrians really kicked it off by declaring war on the Serbians. But it took them a month to get around to that, and there was a lot of talk and a lot of conversation and push and pull. But once—once with all those entangling alliances, as I'm sure most of you know, once one country declared war on another, with all the alliances, there were declarations of war going back and forth very quickly. And the fighting got going in a big way by the end of the summer.

Clarke: So on the morning before WWI the world was neatly organized into often-contested but, you know, colonial territories by the world's powers. And these often-contested areas—you've already mentioned with some of the wars that you mentioned. But the wars like the Russo Japanese War of the Balkan Wars—those didn't trigger a great war, so what was different about WWI that this triggered all that other stuff? Robbins: Well, the alliances came into play and that was a big factor. But also the very fact that these were colonial powers, and they had—you know, they had resources to draw upon, and they also had manpower among them. And they also had situations where in the colonies, they were in conflict with—some of the European powers were in conflict with one another. The Germans and the Brits, most pronouncedly in Sub-Saharan Africa. But this spread to a global war, I think, was really triggered in a sense by the sheer size of the armies that were in question here and the speed with which they could mobilize. The Russians had an enormous army. The Germans—I think one of the things that is often forgotten—when the Germans swept into Belgium and executing the Schlieffen Plan and trying to flank the French line, they hit Belgium with a million men. I mean, this isn't starting out at the skirmish level. This is starting out with a really full-fledged large army. And when the Russians were going to mobilize, they were able to mobilize well over a million—close to two million—and the Germans were very concerned about that, so they in a sense struck first. But those were huge armies, and the huge armies really accelerated the pace of the expansion of the war.

Clarke: So in order for them to actually mobilize that, they had to labor, and they had to have industry, and they had to have a lot of different things in play. What was the world looking like at that time?
Robbins: Well, those things were very unevenly distributed. The Germans had a fabulous railroad network, which made its presence known very early in the war. The Russians were quite behind—I think it's often said about the Russians is that they had numbers but they lacked almost everything else you needed to conduct a major war. They didn't have much of a road network. They had just—not too long before the war broke out, they had entered into a deal with their allies the French to have a French-built railroad network, but they just got going on that. And the Germans were aware of that, and I think if they were thinking, "Sooner or later we’re gonna have to fight the Russians, maybe we better fight them before they've got a good rail network." Because the rail network is one of the things that allowed the Germans to score such an astounding victory in the first big battle they fought with the Russians at Tannenberg, or near Tannenberg.

Clarke: It spread to the Middle East and into China and Japan. What do you think fueled that, that growth of the war?

Robbins: Well, I think it was the--some of the alliances. I don’t think it’s all that well known that Japan had treaty obligations with Britain. And so when the war broke out—and again, this may not be all that widely known either—there were German enclaves, you know, in China. And at the time China was a very weak state. And there were European sort of trading enclaves, and so on, that were partially militarized, I guess, for security reasons. But there was a military—German military presence on mainland China. And the Japanese immediately began attacking that because they were interested in extending their influence in Japan. And the really interesting historical note—again, I think this is probably not all that widely know—is that the Germans had, as part of their late start in forming colonies around the globe—did have possession of a number of islands and island chains in the Pacific. Names—the Marianas, the Carolines—names that became very famous in WWII when the US Army, Navy, and Marines and Airmen had to conquer those islands. They were German protectorates or territories at the time the war broke out, and the Japanese got them as part of the end settlement of WWI. So the Japanese were very much an interested party, although, you know, the war is really thought of as a European war. It was not just a European war. It really spread far and wide and rapidly.

Clarke: So in my explorations about WWI, one thing that always surprises me is just how quickly it became surprisingly brutal and devastating to officers and foot soldiers alike. You had large groups of men from both sides being annihilated by all sorts of different kinds of tools of war. New technology was used to attack both sides. And so—and even attacking civilian populations. So what events stand out in your mind that really drove this to be so quickly brutal?

Robbins: Well, I think, you know—in many cases we’re talking very big armies. And if you’re talking very big armies, you’re talking big casualty lists. If you’re talking big armies colliding with other big armies, then you are talking big causality lists. And I think one of the first—they’re also a sense of calculation or miscalculation in what the tactics were. But in the earliest days of the shooting in WWI, the battle of the frontiers, the Germans were advancing into Belgium, and they had strong defensive positions at the point where the French thought they were going to attack France. So the first thing the French did was mount a very hastily conceived and poorly worked-out attack on a German line of German defenses that was very well formed and powerfully defended. And the result was—well, the French were also attacking with weapons that would have been—and tactics that would have been more appropriate to the glory days of the Napoleonic Wars. The French attacked in this first part of the battle of the frontiers. And within two, maybe three days, the Germans, from their well-defended positions inflicted 140,000 casualties on the French army. It’s arguable that they made have done the army something of a
favor by killing off a high percentage of the most veteran French officers. But in any case
it was a terrible shock to the French nation. Nobody was prepared for casualties on that
scale. And the slaughter started early, and it really never stopped.
Clarke: But mostly people thought this war was gonna be short.
Robbins: They did. That's one of the unpredictable and surprising things about the war.
No one was prepared--none of the belligerents was prepared to fight a long war. They
really all thought in terms of a short war. Sadly some, you know, factions in some of the
countries thought of it as a sporting kind of event. Had a game quality. You can see this
in the British propaganda about the early days of the war. But they--no on was prepared.
No one had the resources or the money or the supply line to conduct a really long
campaign. The British weren't the only ones that thought, you know, this thing is gonna
be over by Christmas. And they were openly talking about that. They were all thinking in
terms of warfare as a matter of weeks. And in defense of that idea, some of the fighting
in earlier wars that they would have been most familiar with--the Franco Prussian War
and the Balkan Wars--they were fairly short. But no one, you know--no one could have
imagined that this thing was gonna drag on for years and just engulf so much of their
populations. So they planned for a short one, and they were wrong.
Clarke: What are some of the surprises you ran into about this early devastating war that
they entered in that they thought was gonna be short but then wasn't?
Robbins: Well--
Clarke: The way the war was conducted, and winners and losers early on?
Robbins: That was one, and I think one of the things that struck me as most surprising is
how resistant to recognizing the impacts of technology on the conduct of war, on the
weapons--how reluctant so many of the officers, especially the British and to some
extent the French as well, and later the Germans. They just didn't realize how much
warfare should have changed. If they had been paying better attention to the American
Civil War and certainly to the Russo Japanese War, they would have had a better idea of
what the impacts of technological innovations were going to have. But tat the beginning
of the war, no one saw aircraft as being a significant weapons system. Maybe for
recognizance. That's it. But the planes were little better motorized kites at the beginning.
They quickly evolved into something much more sophisticated and deadly, but they
weren't that way in the beginning. But there were weapons that really were modern
weapons that were available and, you know, many of the planners of the war in the
general corps should have realized made this a different kind of war. It doesn't seem that
anyone could have really predicted the effects of barbed wire and the rapid development
of rapid-fire weapons. My favorite illustration of that is the famous French 75, which later
gained renowned as a cocktail, of course. But as an actual weapon, the model 97 field
piece with an innovative recoil control system that enabled it to fire, I've seen, up to
twenty rounds a minute. I kind of doubt that they often achieved that, but it was a
significant rapid-fire weapon. Flat trajectory. It was--if you were in sight of your target, it
was a very deadly weapon, although 75 is fairly small. But you know, these weapons--a
weapon like that and the heavy water-cooled machine guns, they just transformed the
battlefield. You know, it wasn't Napoleonic anymore, and it wasn't sharpshooters
anymore. It was mass killing. It was mechanized, industrialized, mass killing. And it took
a lot of people a long time to get the hang of that. It may or may not be apocryphal, but
it's often said that General Douglas Haig considered the machine gun a passing fad and
thought it really couldn't stop a well-conducted cavalry charge. I don't know what his
horses were wearing, but you know-- horses don't do well in the path of 50-caliber
machine guns.
Clarke: You've mentioned in previous conversations about an Austrian unit that's up in
the mountains.
Robbins: Oh (chuckles)--
Clarke: And this seems to be a good story for this misconception of what the war was.
Robbins: Yes. One of the least prepared--one of the earliest, deadliest engagements was the so-called Winter War that occurred in the Carpathian mountains between the Russians and the Austro Hungarian army. This was an ill-considered fight in a territory that was completely unsuited to conduct any kind of combat. There were almost no roads. There was one meandering railroad that didn't go really near close enough to be of any much affect. And the Austrian army had an outpost--a fortress that had been surrounded by the Russians; they wanted to liberate it. And they started throwing enormous numbers of men, eventually to reach the million mark and over at recapturing this fort, which has got--I'm sorry--it has a name that I can't pronounce. It begins with a "P" and an "R". Przemysl or something. But it's--the fighting over that was conducted in the most primitive kinds of conditions. The Austrians had--didn't have appropriate uniforms. They didn't have enough weapons. They had almost no transport. They had almost no way of treating wounded. They had very poor supply lines. People were starving. And to me the anecdote that kind of sums it all up and gives you an idea of both the horror and the context in which it was occurring is that there were verified stories of wounded soldiers being devoured by wolves. It--I came across that in an article by Dennis Showalter, who is a wonderful historian, and I was so struck by him that I called him up and said, "Dennis, are you sure (chuckles) are you sure this is true? Do you have a good source for this?" He assured me that it was and cited his sources. But it was--it's an indicator of how awful and in a way sort of primitive some of those early, large, large engagements were.
Clarke: So it wasn't just warfare that was industrialized. The printing press and large-scale production of propaganda seemed to have an interesting parallel to development of also other kinds of technologies of fighting war. Was this just serendipity or--
Robbins: Well, it was--no. I don't have the exact numbers. I'm not a historian of printing. But, you know, fairly high-speed four-color printing was well established before the war came along. And high-speed printing—'scuse me—for newspapers, which is the dominant news medium, was pretty much a worldwide fact by the 1890s. So the ability to reach a mass--yes, propaganda was the starting point here obviously if you're looking at the book. Starting point as propaganda was enormous and effective in martiaing public opinion, in maintaining the morale of soldiers, and denigrating and demonizing your enemies. And it was effective I think precisely because in the target countries--Britain, Germany, France, and especially the United States where everybody was competing for American public opinion--it was able--the authorities and press people were able to reach a mass audience very quickly, and that was--yeah, that was something of new development. I mean, it was a real factor in the success of propaganda, which is--it's time for a commercial for the book. You can see the effect. And some very clever propaganda, and it was effective. I think, just a side note, I think it's undeniable that the British exploitation of the atrocity opportunity, propaganda opportunities, that they handed the Germans both by the German army's behavior in their transit of Belgium and in the sinking of the Lusitania, was really instrumental in shifting American public opinion in favor of the Brits rather than to Germans. And don't forget, America had a very significant German immigrant population. It was a minority group, but it was a very large group, and in some parts of the country, decisive.
Clarke: I'm guessing the world had not seen a propaganda war quite like this before.
Robbins: No, I don't think so. No, this was--for visual propaganda this was really a highpoint. And it was conducted by the press--you know, more or less free press in the countries. And also by the governments. The German propaganda was almost entirely the work of the German government. And the British also eventually made their
propaganda efforts overt. Early on they had a—in what seems like a typical British way to approach things—they were—they had a subterfuge called Wellington House that posed as an independent publishing house and was generating, you know, magazines, newspapers, stories, books, everything. And it was entirely funded by the British government. Eventually they went public with it. But it was the subterfuge to which people were resorting in conducting propaganda campaigns was quite interesting. One of the things I thought was particularly fascinating is that there was an established newspaper in New York, the Evening Mail, that had been around for decades, and it was secretly purchased by the German government and operated for a couple of years as a supposedly independent newspaper but it was actually an arm of German propaganda. It wasn't exposed until 1918.

Clarke: So many have heard of the movie and the book. The book was published in 1928 in Germany: *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Most people don’t know that was a German book, but it was published in twenty-two languages. Then the very famous American film *All Quiet on the Western Front* came out later in the 30s. And then many in America are familiar with the poem “In Flanders Field” where—That’s where the idea of the poppy to memorialize war dead really comes from.

Robbins: Yeah.

Clarke: So the idea of the war being fought in Belgium and France is kind of seared into our collective memory. But the war had a lot of different fronts, in particular the Eastern front.

Robbins: Yeah, it surely did. Just an example of the Russians and the Austrians slugging it out. The Russians and the Germans also slugged it out. And I would think the most important impact of the conduct of the war in the Eastern front was the extraordinary casualties that the Russians suffered, which badly eroded civilian morale, which in some sense I think can be said to have led to the Russian revolution in 1917, the collapse of the Russian army command structure and then their effectiveness, and eventually their withdrawal from the war. And what succeeded the collapse of the government of course was Lenin's government. So that was the rise of the communist state. And you know, the war was extensively fought in the Mediterranean, in northern and central Africa, and the Middle East, and I think it’s fair to say that we’re still suffering the—we, meaning practically the whole world, is still suffering the consequences of the way the fighting and the diplomacy was exercised in the Middle East. And I’m sure you’re probably all familiar with the story of how, toward the end of the war—not at the end of the war—the territories of the collapsing Ottoman Empire were codified into states by a couple of French and a British diplomat who basically drew lines on a map and said, "Okay, this is Syria, and that’s Lebanon. And this is our influence, and that’s your influence. And that’s Palestine." And we’re—you know, you pick up a paper today; you’re still reading about the consequences. It was over a hundred years ago.

Clarke: Well, as you talk about all that stuff, it also sounds strangely familiar to WWII.

Robbins: Well, you know, I think--

Clarke: When you talk about where the fight was and what was going on. You know, fighting in Africa, and fighting in the--

Robbins: Yeah, it is true, that--but I think this was truly the first world war. I don't know if I'd really characterize it as a global war in the sense that everybody was involved. But it was—certainly elements of it were fought out in some very unexpected places all around the world, and the consequences are ones that are still with us.

Clarke: It’s not just trench lines in France.

Robbins: No it was not just trench lines in France. That’s kind of the stereotype. But it was also vigorous fighting in the Middle East—desert warfare. It wasn’t invented with Rommel. There was a lot of it in WWI.
Clarke: We talked a little bit about this earlier, but I want to expand on it. The American poet Joyce Kilmer, he's part of the American Expeditionary Force, who if you've ever heard the poem "Lovely as a Tree", he wrote that one. He's buried in the Oise-Aisne Cemetery because he was killed in combat over there. He wrote a poem, and I'm gonna read a little bit of it here. It's famous from WWI. It's called "The Rouge Bouquet". And it goes, "In a wood they called the Rouge Bouquet, there is a new-made grave today. Built by never a spade nor pick, yet covered with earth ten meters thick. There they lie, many fighting men, dead in their youthful prime, never to laugh nor love again nor taste the summertime. For death came flying through the air"--and it goes on for a while along the lines. He's really talking about the devastating effect of new technology, of bigger more accurate guns. But it wasn't just bigger, more accurate guns that were killing men on the front.

Robbins: No. The technological elements--I mean, its a very touching poem, and it points to one of the real horrors of the war, which is the effectiveness of artillery, which you know--obviously what he's describing here is being buried by an explosion. The--if you're familiar with the, some of the monuments to the battles, the major battles, there's an enormous number of not just an unknown soldier. They're legions of unknown soldiers. There are hundreds of thousands of unknown soldiers. And the--some of the monuments, especially the one at Verdun, hold the remains of, I think something like, 150,000 person, soldiers who were killed but never identified. You couldn't identify them because there was enough left to identify them. And that's an index of the deadliness of the artillery, which is the--became the leading cause of death in the war. More people were--more soldiers were killed by artillery than any other means. But there were a lot of things. The airplanes were, as I said, kite-like. Submarines were something of a novelty but not terribly effective. The internal combustion engine wasn't all that highly developed at the beginning of the war. There were--well, and the tank of course didn't even exist at the beginning of the war. It was invented during the war. Based on an American farm tractor, by the way. The Brits invented it. Those weapons systems went from either not existing, as the tank did, or from a state of not being greatly effective to being highly deadly, and in the course of the war the development of artillery, the development of machine gun, the development of submarines, and I suppose above all the tank, which didn't prove decisive during the war but when--and the Brits were the leaders in this. The French also built some small tanks, but the Brits went for the heavier things. And they were initially very effective as a weapon of terror. The first time--first couple of times that they appeared on the battlefield advancing on the German lines, they really stampeded the Germans. They hadn't seen anything like it. They knew they couldn't stop it by firing at it. And the one big tank battle, which was a forerunner of tank warfare tactics that eventually develop at the Battle of Cambrai in 1917, the British mustered almost four hundred tanks, which was--the Germans hardly had any. And what they did have that was effective was captured British tanks. But that was the first indication that armor was going to play a major battle in, if not this war, in wars of the future, because they managed to field a large number of tanks. And again, it--there was an initial breakthrough of the German line that was quite wide, and again the German--it just stampeded the Germans' cause they just couldn't stop it. Eventually a lot of the tanks broke down. They weren't very reliable. And having owned several British sports cars I'm tempted to say something generic about motor vehicle quality control in England, but we'll let that one ride. We can talk about that afterward. But they--a lot of them just broke down. But there was no doubt in anyone's mind, I think, that saw that formation that this was a roaring, clanking wave of the future.

Clarke: Well, one of the reasons we picked the cover of Lest We Forget. You have men having problems with horses who are stuck in the mud, but over here on the edge, and
then as you go over here there are model-T trucks. And this is the advancing line from the Battle of St. Mihiel of American Expeditionary Forces going to fight the Meuse Argonne Offensive. And if there's a picture that captures that combination of the war at that time, it really is that picture. If you carefully look at the picture in full, you can also see another line of men just in line marching through France on foot. So it really was this combination of mechanized war and Napoleonic wars.

Robbins: Yeah, exactly. And some--one historian, whose name I'm now forgetting, pointed out that while the Germans had a fantastic railroad network, and they could really--and they had the advantage of interior lines, and they could really rush reinforcements around quite a bit. Once they got off the trains they were moving at the same pace that Caesar's legions were moving. That is, this way. So the achievements and advantages of the technological advances were uneven and unevenly distributed.

Clarke: The flu pandemic was truly a global pandemic. Probably the only thing like it of its kind documented in human history. And the war contributed to this, didn't it?

Robbins: It did. It did enormously. The thing that was different about the--that particular form of influenza is it really attacked and thrived on otherwise healthy, young people. It didn't just cull the herd of sick and disabled. It killed off people who were otherwise in really what we would think is perfect health. And it killed people rapidly. Sometimes people went from, you know, a sniffle and a slight discoloration, and in five days they were dead. It was really, really deadly. And the way the war contributed to the spread of it of course is that it happened just precisely at the time when the American military forces, the mostly the army, were being transported in tightly packed troop ships across the Atlantic. And there are several instances of ships arriving in Europe with having--obviously having had a small number of infected soldiers on board, to when they disembarked a third of the people coming off the ship had the flu. They didn't all die, but it disabled people for a long time as well as killing them. And on the other side it had a profound impact on the German forces because by the time the flu hit they were already suffering very considerably from the effects of the British blockade and other factors that reduced their possible, you know, caloric intake. And soldiers were really in a weakened state. And it caused a very high level of casualties. General Ludendorff himself said after the war that the flu had had a profoundly compromising effect on his series of all-important to him offensives that the mounted in 1918, all of which eventually stalled. But he was fighting with a very weakened force. Yeah, so it had--the effects went both ways.

Clarke: Let's shift over to the Americans getting into the war. I think to say that the Americans were prepared for war when they declared war would be an understatement. I wonder if you would illustrate some examples of just how that was the case.

Robbins: Well, I think the most telling example about the lack of preparedness on the part of America, of the American military is that our army had a total strength of about 120,000. And I've already mentioned that that's--the French had that many killed in the--or were casualties in the first battle they fought. So the scale of things, you know, begins to come in focus. The United States really didn't--the army that the United States did have was mostly experienced at kind of police actions and fighting Native Americans out west. It was not--well, there was the Spanish American War; that's true, but it was a pretty amateurish operation all around, at least in terms of the army. We just didn't have the strength. And so one of the wonders of the--if you take a step back and look at the conduct of American in entering the war, one of the real wonders was the rapidity of mobilization. It was the start of selective service in the United States. Well, I mean, there was a draft in the Civil War of course, but this was a nationwide selective service. And you had to—they were building training camps everywhere very rapidly. I mean, there was this huge rush about everything. And so we had the manpower, and we needed--but we needed the time to get geared up and get people trained and get them over to
Europe without having them sunk by U-boats. And by the way, no US troop ship was ever sunk because they were using convoys at that time, by that time, so that was a big safeguard. And the weaponry was—the heavier weaponry was by and large furnished by the European allies. British and French artillery. Such tank activity as there was by the US army, they were largely relying on the Renault model 17 light tank, which had the very distinctive sort of silhouette of a kind of high turret and out-of-parallel caterpillar tracks. And aircraft, you know—we had the manpower, but we didn’t have the weaponry. But we did have a lot of other things, and industrial production was enormous. We—as I recall we sent an enormous number of vehicles. Mack, the truck manufacture alone sent something like eight or nine thousand trucks to the war. You’ve probably seen the pictures of them lined up. And we were able to produce a lot of things, so that was a big contributor. Men and material.

Clarke: For many there’s this collective, again, idea of armies stuck in trenches stalemated. And for a long time that was pretty true for all sorts of reasons—aerial recognizance, things like that. But the counter offensive of the Germans late in the war and then the seemingly unprepared Americans really changed the tactics of the war late on. Tell me a little bit about how tactics changed throughout the course of the war.

Robbins: Well, some things changed, and some things didn’t. The idea of a mass frontal attack on a heavily defended position never seems to have entirely gone away, but the Germans actually got better at defending against that than the Allies did. And the Germans—just a parentheses here—the term storm trooper has been applied to almost everything from heavy-weapons carrying guys to, you know, out-of-control police departments. But it really had a specific meaning late in the war for the Germans, because they realized that they were—they were getting kind of decimated by ever-more powerful western artillery. And they finally figured out that the way to defend against that is not put up all your guys up in the frontline where the artillery can kill them all but conceive of a defense in echelon in ranks going back miles sometimes but out of the reach of the initial artillery barrages, which the Germans were very good at themselves and the British had gotten very—also very effective at. But to defend yourself by a defense in—really in depth and then in an attack mode, instead of a kind of mass frontal attack, first a very selective careful artillery barrage that would involve, you know, armor-piercing, high explosive gas shells. The Germans got very good at mixing up those things and timing them so that they’d have a thunderous artillery barrage with mostly high-explosives at first, and then when the recipients were trying to recover from that, then hitting them in sequence with gas shell barrages, which would also serve to kill the people who were already confused, and to kill the people who were coming up—the medics and so on, who were coming up to treat the wounded. It was diabolically clever. And then having instead of having a mass attack, having an attack by very carefully trained—small units—those were the storm troopers, who carried an amazing amount of firepower in the form of grenades and light machine guns, and they were not to advance slowly across the open ground, the way armies had done—especially the British in the first part of the war—but to really, to borrow the term, blitz the enemy line in small units and create havoc and encircle forward units. And they tried all these tactics out in the Germans did in their attack on the Latvian city of Riga, which was defended by the Russian 12th Army. And it involved a river crossing. And the Germans rehearsed this for weeks, and they had all kinds of feats and careful moves to just confuse the German—the Russian defenders. And then they attacked in small units. They attacked in boats at first, and then some pontoon bridges that they threw up very quickly. And they—it worked. Instead of a big frontal attack, they got some small units attacking in there. And they just sowed confusion everywhere. And it took them a very short time to completely defeat and basically stamped the Russian 12th army, which in the northern sector that
really left that part of Russia undefended. And when Russia dropped out of the war, the Germans came back and they applied those same tactics in Ludendorff, a famous series of five major offensives, which were effective, eventually stalled, but were short term very effective and, you know, that was the closest the Germans came to winning the war, but at that point they didn't have the manpower to sustain those specialized attacks that they were doing. So we got lucky.

Clarke: So what about the Americans? Pershing did some things that--basically providing a whole fresh army to the mix was certainly a big part of it.

Robbins: Yeah. And of course he was famously resistant to the idea of parceling the Americans out as replacements, which is what the British and the French, French especially, wanted to see happen. They--yeah, the fact of the numbers, I think, were really--the numbers were really overwhelming to the Germans. They had kind of shot their bullet. They were still hard fighting right to the end. But I think it was very clear that the Germans had lost the war. Ludendorff even admitted after the last of his attacks petered out that the combination of, at that point--I've forgotten the exact number, but it's something like a couple of hundred thousand American soldiers were arriving by the month, and those were overwhelming numbers to the Germans. They were really at the bottom of their manpower pool. So that was effective. And the Americans did fight hard. I think they were not always well-led, and there was a lot of confusion, and there was a lot of kind of difficulty in communication with their allies once in the front, but that wasn't--you know, that wasn't the fault of the Americans. The communication at the front line was almost uniformly terrible throughout the war, so that was nothing new. But anyway, the numbers toll and the materiel toll and the, you know, sheer weight of the freshness of the soldiers, I believe, was a factor.

Clarke: Well, this book *Lest We Forget*--the writing in it really does go from the very beginning of the war all the way to the--after the war, and immediately following the war, German paramilitary militias composed of defeated German soldiers really wreaked havoc in the chaotic post-war Germany environment. And they really are seen as the literal precursors to the Nazis. And were there other areas of chaos in the world following the war?

Robbins: Well, there was plenty of chaos in the world. I think it's--we like our history neat for the most part, and it's entertaining to think that the shooting all stopped on November 11, 1918. And it didn't. There was still fighting in Africa, of all places. And the--the situation in Russian remained quite chaotic. There were British contingents fighting in Russian, you know, after the war--well after the war. The US Army was in Russia. There were American boots on the ground in Russia as late as, I believe, 1920. And there's a famous story about some National Guard unit from--I forget whether it was Michigan or Wisconsin, that was stationed in the north. And they were badly led. They didn't know what to do. They were trying to sort of help the White Army as opposed to the Red Army. But there was a lot of fighting going on. And there were a large number of Czechoslovakian soldiers--Czech soldiers, formed as the Czech Legion, that was fighting in--and sort of fought its way out of Siberia. There was a lot of chaos, and that--that's not unusual. You know, if you look at the broad sweep of history, you know, you can make a real serious argument that the reason the Wild West in America was the Wild West was, a lot of it occurred in the direct aftermath of the Civil War when you had a lot of very experienced fighters touting weapons heading out west to seek their fortunes. You now, it wasn't just clerks from Chicago who were going out there. It was guys who'd been fighting for three years ended up out there. And I don't want to get into other stories, but the Great Northfield, Minnesota Raid is a case in story of the Civil War being fought over again. And the same things happened in WWII, you know, again skip to the other end of it. We think that war ended with the signing on the Missouri. Well, not
exactly, because for one thing there were a million Japanese under arms in China the
day that thing was signed, and they didn’t think they’d been defeated. And they were
still--well, George Marshall went over there and sort of talked them down. But I’m
oversimplifying obviously. But big wars--it's not just that some people at the end of the
line don't get the word. You know, chaos has been unleashed, and civil order is
precarious. And you’ve got a lot of armed people and people who are experienced at
fighting. And maybe, you know, there are a lot of young guys who don’t know much else
accept fighting. So it's a recipe for chaos, and there was plenty of it in Germany, but
there was plenty of it elsewhere as well.
Clarke: Well, Michael, thank you very much--
Robbins: Sure.
Clarke: --for a wonderful conversation.
(Applause)
Robbins: Thank you all.
Clarke: Thank you to Michael Robbins for this outstanding discussion, and to BMO
Wealth Management, Tyrone and Anne Fahner, Jahn LLC, Reed Smith, the Satter
Foundation, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund for sponsoring this program. The
book is Lest We Forget: The Great War, published by the Pritzker Military Museum and
Library in partnership with the United States World War One Centennial Commission.
The book features an introduction by the world's leading scholar on WWI, Sir Hugh
Strawn. It has a foreword by the Museum and Library’s founder and chair, Colonel
Illinois Jennifer N. Pritzker, Illinois Army National Guard Retired and an afterword by
Robert Dalessandro, US Army retired, acting char of the American Battle Monuments
Commission. The book is now available at PritzkerMilitary.org, Amazon.com, or at your
local bookseller. To visit the exhibition, Lest We Forget: Sailors, Sammies, and
Doughboys Over There in World War I, visit the Museum and Library in person or view
online at PritzkerMilitary.org/WorldWar1. Thank you, and please join us next time on
Pritzker Military Presents.
Voiceover: Visit the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago. Explore
original exhibits on military history, or be a part of a live studio audience. Watch other
episodes of Pritzker Military Presents, find out What's On, at PritzkerMilitary.org.
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Voiceover: Pritzker Military Presents is made possible by members of the Pritzker
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(Theme music)
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Library.