

Memorial Day Any Year

10-05-2009 by Harry Zirkelbach

More than 10 years ago, concluding a five day visit to the city of Florence Italy, our party of six had stayed at a small roadside Hotel at Commune de Greve in Chianti. From the Hotel front door a small road wends its way through hills south of Florence, Italy. That road passes one of the two American WW II cemeteries in Italy, this named after the city of Florence. It lies 2 miles south of the Milan-Rome autostrada. On that leisure day the family decided to visit this cemetery, now remember it well.

There are 14 permanent WW II military cemeteries world wide. Each is considered American soil. They contain landscaped grave area, a nonsectarian chapel, sculptures, museum area with battle map and narrative depicting the course of the war in that region, and a visitor reception facility. Interred here are 93,243 WW II war dead. Sometimes forgotten, each cemetery Commemorates individually by name, on stone tablets, the servicemen and women who where Missing in Action, lost or buried at sea in their general region of WW II.

Following WW I various Congresses have enacted laws entitling next of kin to select permanent internment of their beloved's remains in an American Cemetery on foreign soil. They are designed, constructed and maintained specifically to honor, in perpetuity, the Dead of war.

By the end of WW II several hundred temporary burial grounds had been established by the Army on the battlefields of that war. In 1947 14 permanent sites were selected in foreign countries, corresponding closely to the course of military operations. All temporary cemeteries were disestablished by the War Department, remains interred according to the directions of next of kin. In a few instances that relative directed the isolated burials be left undistributed, the kin assuming complete responsibility for their care.

The Florence Cemetery covers 70 acres. Visible from the road, it is chiefly west of the Greve stream. Wooded hills which frame the

upper limit, rise several hundred feet above the entrance. Here there are two entrance buildings; between them a bridge leads to the burial area where the headstones of 4,402 of our military dead are arrayed in symmetrical curved rows on the hillside.

On that sunny May 5, 1999 Monday morning the wide expanse of green grass with geometrically placed crosses impressed. We enter, walk the grounds for a few hours. visit random graves, then reach the topmost of three broad terraces, look at the sculpture. We view the Tablets of the Missing, inscribed names of 1,209 who gave their lives, rest in unknown graves. There are two atrium, that on the left serves as the court for the Chapel, the other contains marble operation maps, recording the achievements of the American Forces in this region, by name, area, date of conflicts, breakthrough information.

Finally we meet the Italian care taker who answers questions quietly. We mention names of some we knew who did not return from Europe. On typing that name, learn the Cemetery, grave site, date of death. Notes are made by those inquiring.

The 10th Mountain Division of Camp Hale fame fought here, to France and beyond. These troops are too well represented in the Florence Cemetery.

This Memorial Day at Fort Logan many American visitors will pay respect to their friends who served in the Armed Forces. That is as it should be. The six of us from that visit will also pray for the 5,811 who are remembered for service in the hills and valleys of Italy in 1944 and 1945, stayed there, those many years ago.

