

## American Legion Post 53 history

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Van Neste Square sits in the heart of Ridgewood. It is what many would refer to as the town-square and is used for a variety of local manifestations, the centerpiece of which is a monument to Ridgewood's 20<sup>th</sup> century war casualties - what American Legion Post 53 calls Ridgewood's 114 Honored Dead. The monument is a classic revival memorial column which was designed by Henry Bacon, architect of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Made of Georgia marble, it weighs 183 tons and stands 34' high. The cost to village was \$18,000. Despite a cold wind and snow flurries, the memorial was dedicated in the afternoon of Sunday November 9, 1924 in the presence of 5,000 people. After letters to Mayor Garber from President Coolidge and General Pershing were read, the mother of Jesse Douglass, a World War I casualty, unveiled the monument. It is now the backdrop for annual Memorial Day ceremonies honoring Ridgewood's war dead.

At the dedication in 1924, Oliver Surpluss, Chairman of the Memorial Committee, called upon the citizens to “foster every effort to bring the leading races of the world closer to one another in the arts of peace so that our children will be spared disaster, suffering and a sacrifice, compared to which we have experienced but a pale preliminary.” As these words were spoken, an imprisoned veteran of the defeated Kaiser's army sat in a cell and penned *Mein Kampf*.

On November 16, 1930 a plaque listing the 14 WWI casualties was placed on the monument and on Armistice Day 1931 an individual plaque honoring each World War I casualty was attached to ash trees planted in Graydon Park. As many had disappeared with the passage of time, all remaining plaques were removed in 2011 and given to the Library for preservation. A diorama and a single replacement plaque were installed to commemorate the original 1931 event.

In 1965 the names of Ridgewood's WWII and Korean casualties were added. Plaques honoring casualties from Vietnam were later added to the monument. Two additional casualties from WWII and two additional casualties from Vietnam were added in 1989. Six additional WWII casualties were added in 1991. The 113<sup>th</sup> casualty was added in 2004. The average age of all these martyrs was 25 years old.

Abraham Lincoln spoke of “the silent artillery of time” which will accomplish what all our enemies have not accomplished as the survivors of the same battles that took our martyrs are slowly swept away. Think of that next Memorial Day and thank a veteran.

*“Madam, I took away your son,  
but I give you back the memory of a hero.  
Each year we will celebrate together  
his immortal passing.”*

A. A. Milne

The War Memorial monument faces west and, in 2008, there was discussion about rotating the monument 180° to face into the park. Since the monument's initial installation, the Opera House which was located across the street has been replaced by a bus station and parking lot. Guests and speakers sat on Oak Street during Veterans' Day and Memorial Day ceremonies, facing the monument, as they did in 1924. Since 2010, Memorial Day ceremonies have been held in the park and Veterans' Day ceremonies have been held at the refurbished flag pole on Veterans' Field.

The question was asked if it was significant that the eagle on the war memorial faces west. It was pointed out that at the time the war memorial was dedicated the expression “gone west” had a clear meaning. In reading articles about our WWI casualties, the expression often



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appears as meaning death, or dying. At that time, British soldiers in France developed a terminology that was plain to them, albeit confusing to civilians. They spoke of "Blighty," and of "Gone West." Blighty meant home for rest and recuperation. "Gone West" meant gone from the east with its conflict to the refuge of death, where peace waits in the glory of sunset.

### GOING WEST

"West to the hills, the long, long trail that strikes  
Straight and away into the sunset's glow,  
Ribbed by the narrow barriers of Death--  
Dark are the waters that beside it flow.  
The red flowers fade upon the fields of France.  
The soaring larks are fallen to their nest.  
The glare of battle soothes a little space....  
As they go west.... "

Hugh Pendexter, in *Adventure Magazine*, says "going west," used to mean death, is of American origin. The Karok Indians of California believed the spirit of the good Karok went to the "happy western land." The Cherokee myths picture the west as the "ghost country," the twilight land where the dead go. The Shawnee tell of the boy who "traveled west" to find his sister in the spirit land. The Chippewa believes the spirit "followed a wide, beaten path toward the west". The spirit world of the Fox Indians is at the setting of the sun.

Further, North American pilots also use the expression "gone west". Meetings of pilots often start with a toast to those who have "gone west". The pilots face the west and drink to those who have died. West, in this case, refers to the place the sun sets or is extinguished. Also, *Wings & Airpower Magazine's* obituaries are listed under the heading "Gone West".

However, no memorial protocol has been found which requires that monuments face west and the monument, as of this writing, has not been rotated. Nonetheless, all WWII burial stones in the Normandy American Cemetery face west.