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The Cornell University War Memorial

Dedicated to Cornellians Who Served in World War I

Since the founding of Cornell University in 1866 under the auspices of the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, military instruction has been one of the many facets of campus life. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, over 9000 Cornellians – students, alumni, and professors – answered the nation's call, including some 3000 commissioned officers – more than West Point and Annapolis combined.

Cornell men were the first Americans to carry the Stars and Stripes as part of the American Expeditionary Force, serving under Captain Edward I Tinkham '16 who led their ambulance corps. Cornellians served gallantly in Europe, earning the first French Croix de Guerre (Lieutenant A M Seymour '18) and one of forty-one Congressional Medals of Honor (Sergeant A L Eggers '19). Cornell women participated in the war effort as well, such as Lieutenant Anna I. Von Sholly '02, who was not only the first woman to obtain an Army rank in World War I, but was also awarded the Croix de Guerre.

Sadly, 264 Cornellians gave the ultimate sacrifice during World War I. Among Cornell's casualties were Captain Tinkham '16 and Willard Dickerman Straight '01, who left a large portion of his estate to the university for the construction of what would be one of the first student unions in the country. In 1926, a committee was formed under Robert E Treman '09, a major in the US Army and a member of Cornell's Board of Trustees, to construct a fitting memorial to the service of Cornellians.

The plan evolved into what is now called the War Memorial, Lyon Hall, and McFaddin Hall. The towers adjacent to Lyon and McFaddin Halls were originally dedicated to the Army and Navy, respectively. Inside, each room in the towers is dedicated to a person or group of people. The cloister which joins the two towers contains sixteen panels engraved with the names of Cornell students, alumni, and faculty who died during World War I.

At the north end of the cloister is the Memorial Shrine. When first built in 1931, the Shrine was open to all who cared to visit and reflect. In the 1960s anti-war protesters burned furniture and defaced the room, resulting in its closure. In 1984, the university again opened the Memorial Shrine as a lounge for the adjacent dormitory. Used for relaxation and student activities, a party one night damaged some of the artifacts in the room. In 1990 the care and upkeep of the Shrine was turned over to Cornell's chapter of the ROTC honor society, Scabbard and Blade.



The architecture and symbolism of the War Memorial speak as a living tribute to the thousands of Cornellians who fought in the First World War. Some 76 shields around the exterior of the building contain the insignia of different army divisions and corps from the era, as well as the crests of the state of New York, United States, and Cornell University. Above each of the 16 windows of the cloister are the names of battles in which Cornell units fought.

The Memorial Shrine itself is rich with significance. As you enter the Shrine, the door is engraved with the insignia of the four Army divisions in which Cornellians served – the 27th "New York" Division, the 42nd "Rainbow" Division, the 77th "Statue of Liberty" Division, and the 78th "Lightning" Division. On the left side of the room is an alcove containing three windows and eight flags. The center window contains the shield of Cornell University. To the left of the windows are the four flags of the Allies: the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy. To the right are the four flags of the above-mentioned divisions. To the right of the alcove are framed copies of four letters sent to Major Robert E Treman '09 in support of his fundraising efforts: General of the Armies John J Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Force; Alfred E Smith, then Governor of New York; Marshall Ferdinand Foch, commander of allied forces in France; and Charles Evans Hughes, then Secretary of State and later Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

At the front of the Memorial Shrine is an altar containing the Roll of Honor, listing Cornell's 264 war dead. Beneath it is a signed copy of the radio speech broadcast by President Herbert Hoover on the occasion of the War Memorial's dedication on 23 May 1931. Above the altar is a tablet engraved:





*When the United States of America
engaged in the great war of
1914 – 1918
thousands of the students, former
students, and teachers of
Cornell University
entered the country's service
and therein manfully did their duty.
Many of them lost their lives –
We who knew those dead
have built here
what we hope shall remain
their enduring memorial*

The dedication tablet is surmounted by a carved version of the university's shield. Above it is a mural by Alison Mason Kingsbury containing several symbolic figures. On the left a man holds a flaming sword, representing our will and ability to defend what is right and just. On the right a woman holds a palm, demonstrating our desire to resolve all conflicts peacefully. In the center is a gold star, displayed in wartime by families who had casualties in combat.



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