Finding the Forgotten Generation
A Conversation with Richard Rubin

Richard Rubin’s race to capture memory and piece together a forgotten history.

Richard Rubin calls his book a mosaic. And, indeed, with luminous tales of duty and service, with glittering snippets of music and novels and battlefield memoranda, Rubin has fashioned a multi-faceted, panoramic view of events that changed the world, and are seemingly forgotten. By the time he formulated a plan in 2003 to interview all the living American veterans of the First World War, and set out with questions and a video camera, the remaining vets were few and almost impossible to find. At the advanced ages of 101 to 113, most were living in the homes of relatives or in care facilities, no longer listed in the local phone book.

Time was not on his side.

And yet Rubin spent ten years accumulating the layers of story that form his newest book, The Last of the Doughboys: The Forgotten Generation and Their Forgotten World War. Any reader of history knows that first-person accounts lend relevance and meaning to facts and events. But Rubin didn’t stop with interviews at bedsides or living room chats over cups of coffee. He used these firsthand accounts as seeds to tell a larger story, to give contemporary readers perspective on a conflict so vast that its moniker, the World War, was no exaggeration.

This is not your high school textbook of names and dates. It’s not a military history or trivia digest. It draws on the same essential facts—and so much more. It will surprise you. It will move you. And it will leave you astonished at what you didn’t know.

First, a conversation with Richard Rubin. And later, an excerpt from his book.
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CARLA WALKER: Tell us about this mammoth project. Did you have a plan going in, beyond the interviews with WWI veterans? The research and travel must have consumed your life for a time. What drove you to spend an entire decade working on it?

RICHARD RUBIN: Probably stubbornness as much as anything else. In early 2003 I realized that we were looking at the 85th anniversary of the end of the war and, not having read anything about America and WWI in a very long time, I wondered if I might be able to mark the occasion by interviewing two or three American WWI veterans for a magazine article, pegged to Memorial Day. Of course, I hadn’t encountered a World War I veteran for many years, but I did the math and figured that, although they would certainly be more than 100 years old, at least a few of the four million-plus Americans who’d served in that war must still be living. The problem was, it took me so long to find even one—several months—that I missed Memorial Day and decided, in a fit of pique one day, that since I was expending so much energy in the search, I might as well just plough ahead and find all of them, if I could. Never mind that I had no idea how many that might be.

Eventually, I started finding more and more, and it became obvious to me that there was too much material—too many fascinating stories—for an article; it would have to be a book. But in doing the research required to put these stories in context, I came up against the fact that relatively little has been written about America and World War I; and I decided that, if I were to go ahead and write a book, I didn’t want it to be a book just about the men and women I interviewed and what they had to say, but about America’s experience in the First World War.

I sometimes tell people that I wrote this book because I wanted to read this book, and eventually I figured out that no one else was working on anything like it. If they had been, I could have narrowed my scope to just the people and their stories, and finished up in about half the time. But because it was just me and the entire subject of America and WWI, I had a lot of research to do. I was a history major, and then a journalist, and because of that (and probably my sense of pride), it was tremendously important to me that I get it all right. And that takes a lot of time.

CW: I was struck by the fact that so many of the vets were literally kids—as young as fifteen or sixteen when they enlisted. Tell us about American mentality at that time that allowed such very young people to risk their lives.

RR: Early life had been hard for most of the people I interviewed; childhood and adolescence were luxuries that most families simply couldn’t afford. They grew up in homes without electricity or running water, in families where their labor was needed from a very young age so that they might all avoid starving to death. Many of them lost their fathers in childhood; even more lost siblings. At least one man I interviewed, who enlisted when he was sixteen, was already an orphan and had spent years being passed along to relatives and institutions.

I doubt many of them ever had the privilege of even regarding themselves as children. Joining the army got them off the farm and out of the tenement; it got them clothed and fed and far away from the drudgery and hopelessness that had defined their lives until then. It’s easy to romanticize “olden days” if you haven’t lived through them. And, as I write in the book, the possibility of being killed or maimed in battle always seems remote at the recruiting station.

CW: The histories I’ve read paint the U.S. as terribly ill-equipped for war. Can you offer perspective on that—the extent of preparations and speed at which the government had to mount its force?

RR: At the beginning of 1917, there were only 200,000 men in all of the branches of the United States military. Up until that point, President Wilson had been determined to keep America out of the war, and most Americans agreed with that position. Now, suddenly, America needed to build an army, and fast; and they did. When you consider that by the end of the war—just 19 months after we entered it—America had 4.7 million men and women in uniform, that’s an astounding feat. The British and French, of course, were quite eager to get those men into the trenches; but, to his credit, General Pershing refused to let Americans see combat until he deemed them ready. More important, he refused to let them fight under foreign commanders, aware, as he was, of how badly British and French generals often used foreign troops under their command. Pershing doubtless saved many thousands of American lives by doing so.

CW: It’s evident in the detail of your book that you’ve spent a great deal of time in Europe, particularly France, researching and visiting WWI battlefields. Why was that important to your storytelling?

RR: For me, it added an entirely new dimension to the stories that these very old men had told me about what they’d seen and done over there. They spoke of the where and the what, but rarely of things like terrain and topography. To really appreciate what they went through, and how much they accomplished, you have to see it. And, of course, I was completely unprepared for just how much there still is to see. Over There, a century later. That speaks, too, to how horrible that war was; scars were inflicted upon the earth that will take thousands of years to heal, if ever.

Quite simply, that war was the worst thing that ever happened to France. Every family there lost someone; many families lost almost everyone. Every village lost a good chunk of its male population; in some villages, by the end of the war, there were no men left at all. People still argue about this facet of the war or that—who’s to blame for this defeat, who deserves the credit for that victory, if only this had been done or that not done, the war would have ended much sooner, etc.—as if it all happened last week. In contrast, you hear almost nothing about the Second World War there. And I should add the French are still extremely cognizant, and grateful, to America and Americans for what we did in the First World War. They give us a lot more credit than we give ourselves.

CW: World War II is the war that has captured American imagination. We refer to those veterans as “The Greatest Generation.” Why do you think the First World War has faded from American memory?
RR: That's a very complicated question. In part, we forgot because we wanted to forget; that war turned out to be a terribly traumatic experience for Americans. In part it's because the men and women who fought and won that war weren't comfortable being the center of attention, and demanding they get their due. They weren't raised with that ethos. And in part it's because, in our drive to forget, we ceded the history of that war to British historians, who, angry that America sat out the first 32 months of the war, wrote revisionist histories that glorified the British part in the war while denigrating and minimizing the American contribution. Eventually, we came to believe that version ourselves, even though it's always been far from true.

CW: What should we know about Germany and German soldiers' experience of WWI?

RR: Whenever I go to France, I'm always extremely impressed with the defenses and fortifications the Germans built during the war, and the intricacies of their entire war machine. Their technology was superior in just about every instance, and the level of planning they brought to the enterprise is mind-boggling. As I write in the book, it's difficult to see this stuff and not come away with the impression that the Germans really should have won that war. And for quite a while, they thought they had. Certain parts of France are full of monuments the Germans built to their fallen comrades in 1915 and 1916; you don't do that sort of thing if you think you're only going to be staying for a while.

The other thing I discovered in doing these interviews is that American soldiers and Germans didn't really hate each other in that war; quite the contrary, in fact. They had a tremendous amount of respect for each other. Still, they killed each other just the same.

CW: Armistice didn't mark the end of service for many Americans. What were the duties of post-war troops and what were vets' experiences upon coming home?

RR: Their first duty after the armistice was to guard German prisoners, transport them back to Germany, and occupy sections of that country for a while. For the most part, that only lasted until 1920 or so. The first American troops to come home were given parades, but most of them came home later to nothing of the sort. In fact, what many of them came home to were failed businesses, farms gone to ruin, jobs given to someone else in their absence, and poor prospects for rebuilding what they'd lost. There was nothing like the GI Bill of Rights for America's WWI doughboys. But they made sure, when their sons went off to fight the next war, that there would be a GI Bill in place for them when they got home. They don't get any credit for that, but they should.

CW: As a reader, I came to care about these men and women. I was moved by them and by the sheer weight of the war that would affect generations to come. What piece of the story moved you most?

RR: The human pieces, the stories that I could relate to even though I've never served in the military, much less gone off to war: being frightened; being excited; being frightened and excited at the same time. Losing people you care about. Being young and vigorous and dropped into the middle of a country where you don't speak the language. Finding something to laugh about amidst horror and misery. Finding a way to make peace with terrible memories. Most of all, I think, I was moved by how clear these memories still were to them 85 years later, and how willing they all were to share them with me. In hundreds of hours of conversation, I heard the equivalent of “I don't want to talk about it” exactly once.

CW: Is there a question you wish you had asked these vets, maybe something that came up in writing and editing the book after they had all passed?

RR: With one exception, they were all gone by the time I made it over to France. I would have liked to have been able to come back and talk to them about the places I visited that they had talked about, show them pictures, ask more questions. Hardly a day went by while I was writing the book that I didn't feel the impulse to pick up a phone and call these guys with just one more question. Their stories were so vivid that they still felt very much alive to me. Part of that, I'm sure, is due to the fact that I have all of these conversations on video.

CW: What question have you not been asked—something you'd really like readers to know?

RR: I'm not often asked about the men and women themselves as men and women: What were they like? I think we tend to regard centenarians as marble statues more than human beings, but the people I met and interviewed were very human, with very distinct personalities and foibles and, in some memorable cases, fantastic senses of humor. It's a strange experience, at first, to have a 106-year-old man tell you hilarious risqué stories; but you get used to it soon enough. Very early on, I asked another man what it was like to be 106 years old; he told me it was no different to him than being my age (36 at the time) was to me. He said he never gave age a thought. That really influenced how I approached everyone I interviewed after that.

CW: How did this project change you?

RR: It made me much more patient, for one thing: the very old often speak slowly, with generous pauses, and you just have to wait them out or you might miss something fascinating and important, something you may never get another chance to hear. I'm a New Yorker; I speak quickly, and expect everyone else to do so, too. Or at least I used to.

It changed the way I view aging, the way I view America's role in the war, the way I think of war (it's a much more personal affair to me now), the way I think about memory and remembering... I could go on like this for a long time—but I don't want to test anyone else's patience.

CW: Thanks, Richard, for this terrific insight. It's time to give readers a sample of your work. Turn the page and enjoy an excerpt from The Last of the Doughboys.
EXCERPT:
The Last of the Doughboys
The Forgotten Generation and Their Forgotten World War—By Richard Rubin

Editor’s Note: The following is but a fraction of the conversation Richard Rubin had with veteran George Briant, Battery B, 76th Field Artillery, 3rd Division, U.S. Army, American Expeditionary Forces (AEF). Rubin notes that, among the men and women he interviewed, George Briant was the most emotional—and came the closest to being killed. He was 103 years old at the time of their conversation and fuzzy about only a few of the facts: the age he enlisted (military records show he was 16) and how many places he was hit by shrapnel (George guessed around seven; Rubin’s research notes wounds to the shoulder, hip, eye socket—luckily, he wasn’t blinded—and that blasts knocked out all of his teeth). More immediate were his recollections of battle and his feelings at the time. It was 1918. On one of the worst days, near the sleepy village of Le Charmel, France, George’s battery got caught, unprotected in an open field. Memories of his experiences were still sharp, vivid, even gripping. “At my age, everything was wild,” George recalled, and he was ready for any assignment the Army handed him. “I was at the height of my glory then.” But it didn’t take long for war to sober him. “We grew to be adult persons,” he remarked. “And even though we were kids, it was do or die.”

From The Last of the Doughboys, Richard Rubin speaks first, followed by the unforgettable George Briant.

I asked him why he’d joined up. “To become a man,” his wife declared; he, though, just chuckled at the question, and considered it for a moment.

“The conversation,” he said finally, “was generally on warfare at that time, you see. This one was going to join, that family was going to join — in other words, families were being separated right and left. Young people — young people wanted to join because of youth, age. They all wanted to know what warfare was. So did I. And I sure learned too much about it.”

“I was tickled to the death that they let me [enlist],” he recalled with a smile at one point; but then, suddenly, he grew serious. “But let me tell you, it was no fun,” he said, leaning forward as his voice softened a bit and started to waiver. “War is hell, it’s real hell. It’s nothing to joke with, nothing to laugh with. You might think it’s a journey, having fun or something.” He shook his head. “There’s no fun in war. War is do or die. It’s you or me. And who can pull the trigger faster.”

“No you don’t,” he declared; he, though, just chuckled at the question, and considered it for a moment.

“Were you scared the first time you went into battle?” I asked him.

He was silent for a beat. “Yeah,” he said soberly, then shook his head. “It’s a funny feeling. There was a thrill, you understand?” he explained, raising both hands. “You knew you were in real action then, you see. They wasn’t saying, ‘We’re going to train you.’ or nothing.” He raised his hands again, pointing both forefingers to form rifle barrels. “You’re going to take those guns and you’re going to fight for your life.”

None of the other veterans I interviewed, before or after, had ever gotten near a word like “thrill” when describing combat. They all must have understood, on some level, that such a composite of terror and excitement is an awfully heavy thing to carry with you throughout a life, and that you’d better find a way to set it down and move on without it if you wanted yours to be a long one.

But not George Briant. He had borne an awful lot of pain in his life, not just during the war but throughout what sounded like a wretched childhood — and then he lost his only child, his son, his namesake, at a terribly young age. Any one of those is the kind of thing you might never get over; all three together could kill you. But they didn’t kill George Briant; in fact, by all accounts he led a happy, fulfilled, godly life. He never had much money — eventually, after passing through several other jobs, he set up shop as a sign painter — and spent most of his retirement living in a trailer. But I read, in one of his obituaries, that he and Germaine were in the habit of plucking old toys out of the trash, repairing and restoring them, and then giving them to needy children.

A crushed man doesn’t do that sort of thing.

So I wonder if, maybe, George Briant managed to do something that seemingly no one else I’d met had – that perhaps like him they had, a ways back, set down their load, but that he had also, somehow, always kept track of where he’d left it, always knew where it was so that he could, if the occasion should call for it, run back and fetch it.

“I’ll tell you something,” he said once, after a long pause. “There’s two things about warfare. You want to be there, but you don’t want to be there. But you’ve got to be in both places, and you can’t do it. So you try to” – he moved his hand around from point to point, mimicking with his pinched fingers the dance one might do in trying to avoid incoming fire – “and you keep trying. But of course, you wind up in the graveyard.”

The 76th had spent the second half of July on the offensive, chasing the Germans across the Aisne-Marne Sector. They moved often, almost always under cover of darkness. “Jumping from place to place,” Mr. Briant recalled. “You’re moving as fast – I mean, you’re here now, and three hours later, you get all packed up and be ready to leave. They don’t tell you where you’re leaving for, but be ready to leave in three hours. So you get all the equipment together, pack it all up, and in three hours you’re standing out there in the open field, like that, waiting, waiting.”

Battery B was ordered to move in daylight; and then, already dangerously exposed, they – well, they got stuck in traffic. “We were changing positions,” he recalled. “We were going to take a French position, you see, and they were supposed to have moved. But when we got there, they had never moved. They left us out in the open.” Literally: Battery B was stuck standing in an open field, the sun high overhead, illuminating them, as if an artillery battery surrounded only by grass and hay needed further illumination. They could do nothing but stand there and wait, wondering which would reach them first – orders that they could finally move, or something very bad.

And then they heard it: something very bad.
You can’t help but marvel, nearly a century later, that aircraft were still so new at that point that “planes” required an apostrophe up front to remind you that it was short for “aeroplanes.” Planes themselves were also still objects of marvel for many; but for the men of Battery B on July 28, 1918, they were just objects of terror, moving unfettered overhead as you were trapped down on earth, as free to kill you as were those unseen German soldiers hiding just off the road in the dark of night. Unlike those soldiers, though, the planes didn’t hold their fire.

“I had seven holes in me,” he repeated at one point. “Biggest one was the size of a silver dollar, right in here.” He touched his right shoulder. “Then I had one over the eye” – he raised a hand to his left eye – “how I didn’t lose my eyesight, I don’t know. It was a miracle.

He spent three months in the hospital, and even after that, the Army was inclined to just ship him home. He pleaded with them to send him back to the 76th, instead.

He was discharged from the hospital on October 20, 1918, and was back with Battery B within the week. And he saw how the war ended.

For the rest of his long life, though, he wished he hadn’t.

RICHARD RUBIN has written extensively for magazines including The Atlantic, AARP The Magazine, and The New York Times Magazine. He was the 2008-2010 Viebranz Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at St. Lawrence University in Canton, NY, and writer, producer, narrator of the NPR radio documentary “World War I at 78 RPM.” His other work includes short stories; “Over There – And Gone Forever,” a Veterans Day essay named a 2007 New York Times notable Op-Ed; and Confederacy of Silence: A True Tale of the New Old South (Atria, 2002). The preceding excerpt is from The Last of the Doughboys by Richard Rubin. Copyright © 2013 by Richard Rubin. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

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➤ Richard Rubin’s website has photos and video clips from his interviews with WWI veterans, and audio of WWI-era music. richardrubinonline.com (click on the Media tab for video, photos, and music; click on the Press tab to read and hear additional interviews)