

Navy League of the United States

Sept.-Oct. 2024 Issue

# The Ship's Bell

Placer County Council,  
Navy League of the  
United States  
Auburn, CA

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# President's Message

**By Bonnie Potter**

I want to begin by thanking our Community Affiliates ... TGH Aviation, Lassila Funeral Chapel and Chapel of the Hills. With your support, we can do even more to support the mission of the Navy League. We greatly appreciate your membership, your friendship and your attendance at our monthly dinner meetings.

National POW/MIA Recognition Day is observed on the third Friday in September. It honors those who were prisoners of war (POWs) and those who are still missing in action (MIA). We always pause during our September meeting to remember those still missing.

At our September meeting we heard from MMN1 Robert Levans, the Nuclear Propulsion Program Coordinator for Naval Talent Acquisition Group Golden Gate. He talked about the important mission of recruiting, and how important it is for us veterans to speak about our experiences which exposes our youth to the military and helps them achieve their recruiting goals.

Our Council will be holding a Hall Sale fundraiser in October and YOU CAN HELP!! Please donate items for the sale which will be held on Saturday, October 5, 2024, at the Auburn Veterans Hall from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. We will be receiving donations (please, no furniture, appliances or electronics) at the Hall on Thursday, Oct. 3rd from 8 to 5, or you can call me at home at 530-823-2820 to arrange a drop-off. We will also have a bake sale, and we would love to have you bring bake sale items wrapped or bagged, priced, and brought to the Hall on Friday, Oct 4 in the afternoon, or the morning of the sale, Saturday, Oct 5 at 8 am. All proceeds will be used to support our youth programs, and the active-duty units we sponsor.

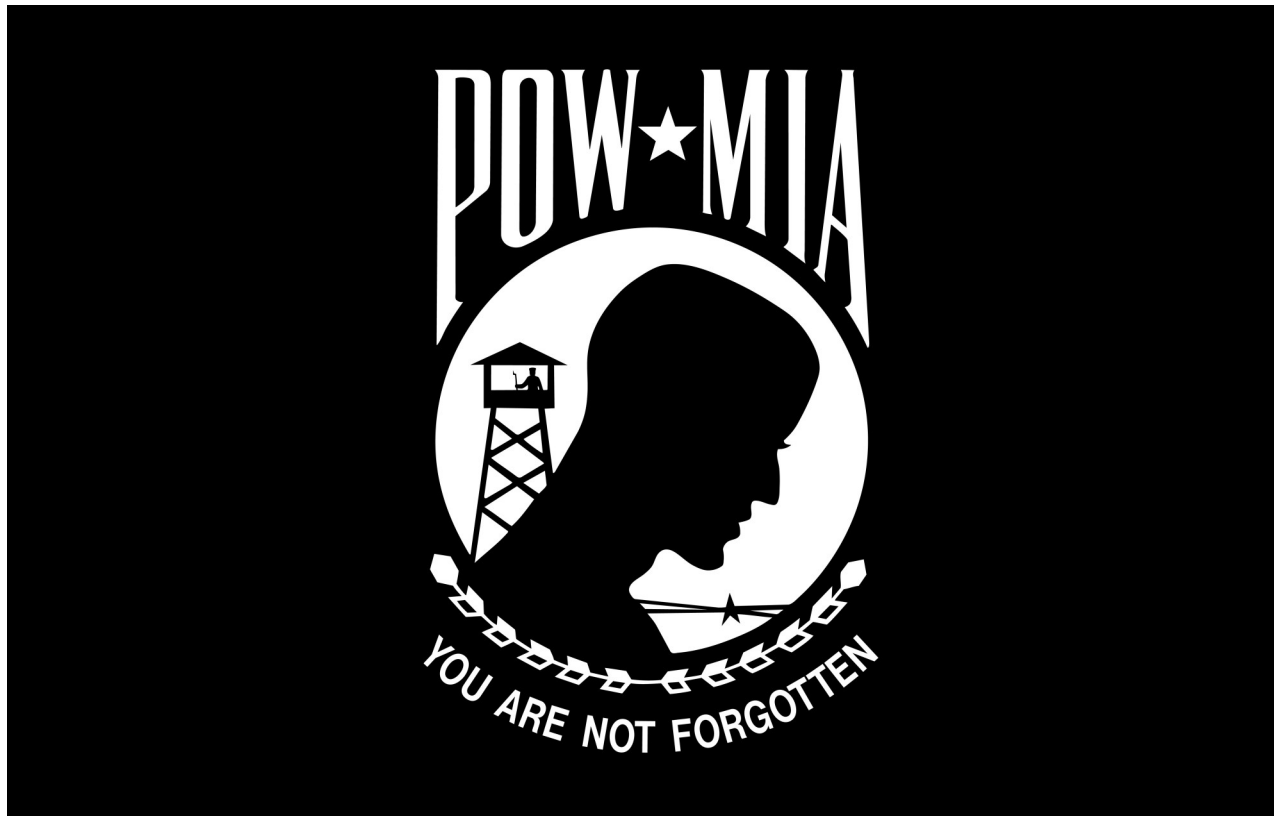
Our speaker in October will be Donna Arz of the Forgotten Soldier Program. We had previously planned a presentation on Amelia Earhart, but the speaker had to postpone due to health issues. So, thank you Donna for agreeing to speak on such short notice. We will also celebrate the Navy Birthday with a cake cutting. Please join us if you can!!

One of our long-standing fund raisers is the annual purchase of wreaths to be placed on the graves of our veterans in the Auburn cemeteries. If you have not yet purchased one or more wreaths for 2024, please go to [www.wreathsaacrossamerica.org](http://www.wreathsaacrossamerica.org). Be sure to use our Group ID # CA0221P. Under the red Sponsor Wreaths button, click on "Local Sponsorship Group", and type CA0221P on the line for group to support and Placer County Council of the Navy League should show up. Click on it, and Auburn Cemetery should show up as location to support. Click Review My Sponsorships to be taken to the shopping cart for checkout. Remember, we get \$5 for the Council for every wreath that is purchased using our ID number. The ceremony this year will be Saturday, December 14 th at 9:00 am at the New Auburn Ceremony.

We can be proud of all that we accomplish as the Placer County Council of the Navy League of the United States. We certainly fulfill the mission to Educate, Advocate and Support!

As always, let us remember the courageous men and women of all our military services who put their lives in harm's way every day, whether at home or abroad, in defense of our freedom.

Cheers, Bonnie



*(Image found on [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/POW/MIA\\_flag](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/POW/MIA_flag)).*

# France's First Soldier

By Natalie Brennan

Okay, for some backstory. I vehemently enjoy listening to a Swedish heavy metal band, called *Sabaton*, whose songs are all about military history and historical figures. Their song, *The First Soldier*, is what inspired me to share the knowledge that I learned through them with you. By the way, get used to me referencing this band more than I already have; I want to share my passion for history through these newsletters for those who are not into heavy metal music, but I do highly recommend you check out their YouTube channel *Sabaton History*, which also delves into the history of their songs. This is the story of Albert Severin Roche (last name sounds like Rosh), France's first soldier.

The story of this unsung hero of France began on 5 March 1895 when he was born to a farming family in Réauville, France. While not much is known about his childhood, it can be hypothesized that farm life was not on Albert's bucket list. At the age of eighteen in 1913, with the storm of war brewing in Europe, Albert tried to enlist in the French Army. However, he was rejected due to his height of five feet, two inches; the assessment board rejected him for this, deeming him too weak and small to make a good soldier. For reference, America's most decorated soldier in World War II, Audie Murphy, was taller than Albert Roche at five feet, five inches.

Albert was far from being put off at the initial rejection, the longing for adventure and danger that many young men his age bought into at this time fueled his desire to fight. With the outbreak of war in August 1914, France called upon her sons to fight and so, Albert ran away from home to attempt, once more, to enlist. This time beggars could not be choosers, so the assessment board accepted Albert into the army. This was because of the need for French volunteers to close up the lines and block the rapid German advance in the early months of the war. Albert was thus assigned to the 30<sup>th</sup> Battalion of *Chasseurs*, a light infantry group best used in skirmish fighting in the woods and mountains.

While Albert was enthused to finally be part of France's army, that enthusiasm soon fizzled out when he went to training. His peers and superior officers looked down on Albert because he was hot-tempered, would constantly get into fights, and talk back to the officers. He decided to run away, but unlike running away from home, he was arrested and charged with desertion, a grave crime that would often result in prison time at best or execution at worst. Albert denied the charge, he wanted to be at the front rather than a training camp. He claimed that "bad soldiers are sent up there [to training camps], but I want to go where we fight." The military command decided that his punishment would be to grant his wish, and Albert was sent to the front immediately. Albert was thus transferred to the 27<sup>th</sup> Battalion of *Chasseurs Alpains*, the elite Alpine light infantry if you will, on 3 July 1915. They were known as the Blue Devils, and were experts in mountain warfare, which tended to call for skiing and climbing on top of fighting the enemy.

During the second half of 1915, Albert and the Blue Devils found themselves fighting the Germans at the Eine River. This area was a particularly annoying thorn in the sides of the French High Command because the Germans had the high ground, and therefore, held the advantage, along with their new entrenched blockhouses, where they could machine gun the enemy from the safety of a concrete bunker.

During this skirmish, Albert elected to crawl over the mud and barbed wire to the blockhouses, peeking into one and seeing the enemy around a fireplace. Crawling up to the top of the concrete bunker, Albert threw several grenades down the chimney, killing many of the soldiers within and taking the eight survivors as prisoners, who assumed that a larger force had surrounded them, and their machine guns. This was Albert's first notable engagement in the Great War, but it was not the last.

Later, Albert and the Blue Devils moved to Alsace. The mountain fighting in Alsace suited the Blue Devils well, but the ultimate goal of fighting there was to liberate the town of Alsace-Lorraine so as to give a much needed morale boost to the French people. The Germans were not going to give it up easily, so one day, they launched a massive artillery barrage on Albert's position and devastated the Blue Devil's ranks. When fighting in the mountains, one cannot dig trenches very deep, so the German artillery barrage completely destroyed the French lines, killing everyone in them. Everyone but Albert. Realizing that he was the only survivor and that the Germans were advancing, Albert gathered up the rifles and grenades of his fallen comrades, preparing to go down fighting. Albert single-handedly held the line, firing the rifles down the line and throwing grenades at the enemy, giving them hell. This one-man defense forced the Germans to abort the attack and retreat.

Albert had many close calls during the Great War, and he was known to volunteer himself to take the most dangerous missions that saw many comrades simply never return. It was on one reconnaissance mission that Albert and his lieutenant were surrounded. The lieutenant was wounded and both he and Albert were captured by the Germans. To this day, historians do not know how he did it, but Albert managed to kill his interrogator, steal his weapon, and escape, marching back to the French lines carrying his lieutenant on his back, and shepherding forty-two prisoners.

However, the closest call Albert had was from his own comrades. While fighting in Chemin des Dames, his captain fell wounded. Albert braved heavy machine gun fire and crawled to his wounded superior's side, this took him six hours to do, plus another four hours to drag the captain back to the French lines where Albert relinquished the wounded officer to the medics. After hours of painfully crawling along and dragging a wounded comrade to safety, Albert curled up and fell asleep.

He was woken up by a kick, opening his eyes to see a French patrol pointing their weapons at him. They assumed he had fallen asleep on duty, another grave crime that had dire consequences. The French had a system where field commanders could shoot men who refused to go over the top, or were caught sleeping on duty. Albert protested his innocence, but his only alibi, the wounded captain, was unconscious somewhere in a French field hospital, so his protests were ignored. He was found guilty and sentenced to death by firing squad in twenty-four hours. Albert accepted his fate, writing to his father "In an hour I shall be shot, but I assure you that I am innocent." To make this fact even more sad, around 2,500 French soldiers were sentenced to death by summary execution during the Great War, of which at least 1,109 were actually killed. The saddest part of all of this is that even today, these men are still considered deserters and criminals, rather than victims of the war.

Standing before the firing squad, we cannot begin to imagine the thoughts that swam through Albert's mind. His own country was going to kill him for a crime he did not commit, after all the valiant service that he gave. However, by some act of all the deities in the universe, seconds before the order to fire was given, a messenger arrived with notice that the captain whom Albert had saved, had regained consciousness and backed up Albert's story, saving his life.

Albert continued to serve the country that almost killed him for the rest of the war. At the end of the Great War, Albert had earned no rank, remaining a second-class soldier, despite having amassed an impressive record. At the age of only twenty-three, he had single-handedly taken around 1,180 prisoners, and was wounded a total of nine times. These exploits caught the attention of Supreme Allied Commander General Ferdinand Foch, who, in front of a massive crowd in Alsace-Lorraine on 27 November 1918, presented their liberator, Albert Severin Roche, as the First Soldier of France (Writer's note here: Seriously, how is there not a movie about this man yet?!).

Albert earned many of the highest awards that the French Army could bestow upon a soldier, such as the Médaille Militaire, the Croix du combattant volontaire, and the Croix de Guerre. Albert was inaugurated into the National Order of the Legion of Honour on 3 September 1918, and many other honors. However, what might be his biggest honor was being one of the seven men to carry the coffin of the Unknown Soldier to his final resting place at the

# France's First Soldier continued

Arc de Triomphe in Paris in the 1920s.

Albert returned to his family's farm after the war, married, fathered a child, and farmed on his in-law's property. However, civilian life was not kind to a now depressed Albert, who went to work in the city repairing roads. However, with the Second World War looming, Albert soon got a job at a gunpowder factory.

On 14 April 1939, while descending a bus after work, Albert was run over by a speeding car and thrown against a tree. He was rushed to the hospital, but it was too late; a tragically ironic fate for the First Soldier of France. Historian Pierre Michel is quoted to have said: "This man had gone through four years of war. He had been wounded nine times, he had been close to death a thousand times, almost unjustly shot as a mutineer. He had escaped all dangers, all accidents, all of this to be killed twenty years later on his way home, on the descent of the bus." Albert Severin Roche, the First Soldier of France, perished just five months before the outbreak of the Second World War, when France was to need heroes just like him to answer the call.

Once again, I would not have ever learned this information had it not been for *Sabaton*, or their YouTube channel *Sabaton History*. They tell the more obscure stories of individuals within the larger conflicts; they are how I learned about the Night Witches, Milunka Savić, the Charlie Brown-Franz Stigler Incident, and Witold Pilecki. Even if you yourselves, dear readers, are not fans of heavy metal, please do check out their YouTube channel, which I also get my information from, for yourselves.

Sources:

<https://www.warhistoryonline.com/world-war-i/albert-severin-roche.html>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kABvnbREyOE>



Above: The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Arc de Triomphe. Roche was one of the men to carry the coffin to this spot. (Image found on [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tomb\\_of\\_the\\_Unknown\\_Soldier\\_%28France%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tomb_of_the_Unknown_Soldier_%28France%29)).

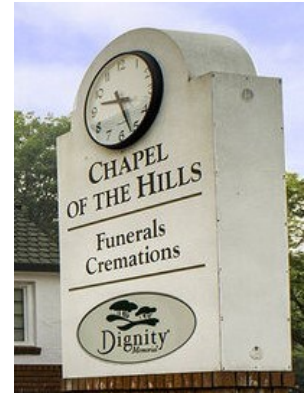




*Above: Albert Severin Roche. (Image found on [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert\\_Severin\\_Roche](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Severin_Roche)).*

# Special Thanks to Our Community Affiliates

Special thanks goes to one of our Community Affiliates, Lassila Funeral Chapel, Chapel of the Hills, and TGH Aviation. Your partnership with the Placer County Council Navy League is most appreciated.



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**Thank You for Reading!**

