



**NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION**

**SUPREME ALLIED COMMANDER  
TRANSFORMATION**

**SACT's opening remarks at**

**Exhibit Opening  
MacArthur Memorial WWI Symposium  
“Over Here, Over There”  
Norfolk, 08 Apr 2017, 1408-1414**

**Final – as prepared**

**Général d'armée aérienne Denis MERCIER**



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Thank you Christopher for your kind introduction. It is a great pleasure and an honour for me to be here today, and to say a few words before cutting the ribbon to open the exhibit.

Let me start by congratulating the team from the MacArthur Memorial, the Hampton Roads Naval Historical Foundation, the Hampton Roads Naval Museum, the City of Norfolk and the General Douglas MacArthur Foundation, for their support to today's symposium and the "Over Here, Over There" special exhibit.

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On April 6<sup>th</sup> 1917 the United States officially entered the First World War, and the American Expeditionary Forces were established in France in July of that same year under the command of General John Pershing. The first American troops engaged in combat operations in October 1917.

But they were not the first Americans to fight in the "Great War". By the end of August 1914, only a few weeks after Germany declared war on France, the first American volunteers assembled in Paris to join the French Foreign Legion. Many Americans volunteered to fight alongside their French comrades, while others chose to operate field hospitals, or drive ambulances and relief trucks. American volunteers also joined British or Canadian military units.

These were idealistic young men and women, who shared the same values and a fierce attachment to the ideals of freedom and peace, and were willing to risk their lives to combat tyranny. Hundreds were killed in France, or perished at sea, before the American Expeditionary Forces even saw action in Europe.

Among these volunteers of "the first hour" was a young North Carolinian, named Kiffin Rockwell. He and his brother left to join the French Army in the summer of 1914. After he enlisted in the French Foreign Legion, Kiffin was severely wounded by machine gun fire in May 1915. After convalescing, he

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volunteered for flight training in the French aviation service and, he joined the famous Lafayette Escadrille as a pilot in April 1916. A brave and skilful aviator, he was the first American pilot to score an aerial victory. But sadly, he was shot down and killed in September 1916, flying as an American pilot in the skies over France. In a letter to his family he had written: *“I do not feel that I fight for France alone, but for the cause of whole humanity, the greatest of all causes. I pay my debt for Lafayette and Rochambeau.”*

To honour the commitment of the United States in the First World War, and more specifically the American heroes of the Lafayette Escadrille, the French Air Force demonstration team known as the “Patrouille de France” is currently touring the United States. So, as I speak, French pilots are flying above Montgomery, Alabama, as part of a two-day air show at the Maxwell Air Force base, and later this month they will come to Norfolk and the Naval Base, that is also celebrating its centennial.

A century ago, the American “Lafayette” pilots, along with the more than two million American soldiers that fought in the battlefields of Europe, personified the shared values of unity, trust and friendship in the service of freedom and peace. They crossed the Atlantic to fight alongside the Allies. They were the very embodiment of our strong transatlantic bond, a linkage that remains the bedrock of our security.

Indeed, since 1949, these same values remain at the heart of the North Atlantic Treaty’s mission: to promote stability and ensure the security of our nations and their inhabitants, founded on the key principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. And this year, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, American and Canadian troops are once again deployed in Europe in support of their Allies at the Eastern borders of our Alliance.

My Command, Allied Command Transformation, based here in Norfolk, is the only NATO headquarters on American soil. It too serves as a strong



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symbol of the Transatlantic Bond, part of this long and shared heritage in the defence of our common values.

Today's symposium and the exhibit we are about to open, allow us to travel back in time to the First World War.

"Over here", with the mobilization of U.S troops and the creation of the Norfolk Naval Base to support and to protect the convoys crossing the Atlantic, a mission that is still valid today should we need to quickly reinforce NATO troops deployed at Europe's Eastern borders.

"Over there", with the "training in the field" and the transformation, on the one hand of the American Expeditionary Forces into an independent US field Army, and on the other of the Lafayette Escadrille into the US Army Air Service, both of which played an essential role in the war.

Many of you will be familiar with the quote from George Santayana: "*Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it*". Clearly the past has much to teach us, and while we might not always be able to avoid mistakes, it will surely help us to better prepare for the future.

As we salute the sacrifices made by past generations, their examples will continue to inspire future generations, and fortify the foundations of the special bond between the European nations and the United States of America, based on shared values and profound friendship.

\*\*\*Thank you\*\*\*