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Rhinelanders Revisited: Local guardsmen served in World War I, II

Stephanie Kuski River News Features reporter

Countless citizens in our community and beyond have demonstrated tenacious bravery on the frontlines during times of war. Though generations of servicemen have come and gone in the decades since, their legacy lives on.

Even in the early decades of statehood, Wisconsin men - including those in rural communities like Rhinelanders - were quick to respond to the call for troops when armed conflict between the U.S. and Spain erupted in 1898 after the USS Maine mysteriously exploded in Havana Harbor, Cuba. Four Wisconsin infantry regiments were mustered in, but only half saw active duty abroad in Puerto Rico. All were mustered out within a few months, but the majority of troops entered again in the reorganized Wisconsin National Guard in 1899.



Photo courtesy of the Rhinelanders Historical Society

National Guardsmen in Rhinelanders' Company L, 127th Infantry, 32nd Division returned home in June of 1919, following combat abroad in France during World War I, to a warm welcome. A parade and other festivities were held.

Years later, as massive conscript armies shattered a divided Europe at the beginning of the first World War in 1914, the peace-minded Woodrow Wilson headed an undisturbed America. By the early months of 1916, however, threats to American security at the Mexican border became imminent at the same time a militant Germany threatened U.S. merchant ships, upsetting the delicate balance of world powers.

Mexico had been living in revolt for years, but violence spilled across the border when General Pancho Villa - famed Mexican revolutionary turned guerrilla leader - raided the sleepy town of Columbus, New Mexico in March 1916. By May of that same year, three U.S. border states were called into federal service to fight in the Mexican Border War.

On June 18, 1916, members of the Wisconsin National Guard were called into service. Over 4,500 guardsmen arrived at Camp Douglas in Sparta by June 22, including members of Rhinelanders' Company L of the 127th Infantry.

By July, Company L arrived in San Antonio, but the border crisis practically ended just as men in the Wisconsin National Guard reached Texas. That summer the guard drilled and trained on the border, but the Rhinelanders unit never saw any fighting; just heat and monotony.

Company L was ordered to return home in January of 1917. But come April, Germany ordered a decisive attack that sunk several American merchant ships sailing around the British Isles. Since Great Britain was one of America's closest training partners, this attack provoked even more tension between the U.S. and Germany, prompting the U.S. to join the Allied forces and enter World War I on April 6, 1917.

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A wave of patriotism flooded Hodagland at this time, compelling countless brave men to enlist. On the home front, the Rhinelanders News, a weekly publication, converted to a daily shortly after war was declared so locals could quickly consume war-related bulletins.

On July 15, 1917 the Wisconsin National Guard was called into federal service by President Wilson. Consisting of approximately 15,000 Wisconsin and 8,000 Michigan guardsmen, the 32nd Division was formed that same July at Camp MacArthur in Waco, Texas.

By early August, Rhinelanders' Company L packed the platform at the Northwestern station as they boarded a special train on their way to Camp Douglas. By September, guardsman left Camp Douglas for Waco, Texas prior to a stop in Camp Merritt, New Jersey. The unit reached Bordeaux, France by February 1918.

For the next half year, the division fought over trenches and barbed wire entanglements in offensives such as Haute-Alsace, Aisne-Marne, Oise-Aisne and Meuse-Argonne. The troops were under fire from May to November, and with only 10 days of rest, they fought on five fronts in three major offenses, vanquished 23 German divisions and captured over 2,000 prisoners.

During tough combat in France, the 32nd Division earned the French nickname Les Terribles or "the terrible ones" for their fortitude in advancing difficult terrain. Famously, the 32nd was also the first division to pierce the Hindenburg Line of defense, and for that, they proudly donned a shoulder sleeve insignia with a line shot through a red arrow as a symbol of their tenacity. Accordingly, the 32nd soon became known as the Red Arrow Division.

When World War I finally ended on Nov. 11, 1918, more than two million American soldiers had served on battlefields abroad, while some 50,000 had lost their lives. At war's end, the 32nd Division remained abroad as part of the Army of Occupation in Germany. They were discharged in June of 1919 at Camp Grant near Rockford, Illinois.

When Company L returned to Rhinelanders, they were welcomed home with one of the biggest celebrations ever held in Oneida County at that time. Streets, businesses and homes were dressed in gala attire to honor the men who served in Company L of the Red Arrow Division.

During the decades of peace between the World Wars, the 32nd Division of the National Guard remained a joint Michigan-Wisconsin unit.

By September of 1939, however, the rumblings of war were once again unmistakable. Hitler invaded Poland from the west, and soon thereafter, France and Great Britain declared war on Germany. The second World War erupted in a disjointed Europe while the U.S. renewed their declaration of neutrality.

But the threat of war spurred President Franklin Roosevelt to approve the country's first peacetime military draft in September of 1940. On Oct. 15, 1940, young men enlisted in the Wisconsin National Guard fatefully answered the presidential call to arms. Those who swiftly marched off to training camp, however, could not know that many were to face death in the jungles of the South Pacific.

Following activation of their unit, Rhinelanders men in Company B of the 127th Infantry, 32nd Division left immediately for a year of peacetime training in Camp Beauregard, Louisiana. Come February 1941, Company B and the rest of the 32nd Division moved to Camp Livingston, Louisiana to complete their training.

By August, Congress removed restrictions on guard service as federal troops, including the 12-month service limit and restriction that ex-guardsman could not be sent outside the continental U.S. For that reason, the famed 32nd Division remained available for emergency duty four months prior to the bombing at Pearl Harbor.

Following the tragedy that struck American soil on Dec. 7, 1941, the 32nd traveled by train to Fort Devens, Massachusetts, where the Red Arrow Division then crossed the country via train to sail from San Francisco. By May 1942, Company B arrived in Port Adelaide, South Australia for further training near Brisbane.

But by September, the war in the Pacific had taken a dangerous turn. Company B fought in the Buna-Sanananda campaign, where weather and insects plagued men already faced with food and ammunition shortage. Malaria, dengue fever, heat and exhaustion were enemies to the 32nd just as much as the Japanese.

Replacements finally arrived in January of 1943 and the 127th Infantry pried out the last of the Japanese at Sanananda. The Red Arrow Division, badly battered, completed its first major mission with the Buna campaign and returned to Australia to gather strength. By early 1944, the 32nd Division began a series of leapfrog moves up the coast of New Guinea and into the Philippines.

On the home front, mail sent from troops to their family back home was their only way to keep in touch. Victory mail - or v-mail as it was known - expedited mail service for American armed forces overseas. It was a single sheet of thin paper that could be folded into an envelope shape after one side had been written upon.

During this time, the Oneida Service News was also printed weekly to keep locals abreast of the whereabouts and condition of local servicemen; honors, deaths, movement and successes were reported. The Rhinelanders Daily News also printed maps of the maritime war to keep area citizens in the know.

Indeed, the Red Arrow men had many successes to report: they were the first to embark for overseas service after the bombing at Pearl Harbor, they were the first U.S. division to fight an offensive attack against the Japanese in the South Pacific and they were the first division to "hop-skip" from objective to objective.

The goal of the Philippines campaign of 1944-45 was to recapture and liberate the Philippine Archipelago to end



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nearly three years of Japanese occupation. The 32nd Division remained on the front lines until Japanese resistance at the Battle of Leyte was broken in December of 1944.

From Lyte, the 32nd Division moved to Luzon in January of 1945 where they captured Japanese general Tomoyuki Yamashita, who surrendered on Sept. 2, 1945. By October, the division left Luzon for Japan, arriving on the island of Kyushu where the division remained until it was deactivated in February of 1946.

During their time at war abroad, the 32nd Division endured 654 days of combat - more than any U.S. division in any war at that time. They fought in six major engagements and four campaigns, and men of the Red Arrow Division returned home with an impressive array of military decorations.

In the Philippines, the 32nd Division erected a memorial Red Arrow monument. In Wisconsin, State Highway 32 - which stretches north to south across the state - was named the Red Arrow Memorial Highway in honor of those brave guardsmen.

While the Allies were victorious at the end of World War II, Wisconsinites back home were reminded of the ravages of combat in another way.

In 1945, over 13,000 prisoners of war were housed among 38 Wisconsin communities as "branch camps" for German POWs. The stateside POW camps were created to ease the burden of supplying and guarding prisoners overseas, and having them in the States also eased the labor shortage here. Although most POW camps in Wisconsin were in the southern part of the state, four existed in the rural north, including those in Barron, Milltown, Antigo and Rhinelanders.

Camp Rhinelanders housed 190 German POWs from August to October 1945. The prisoners were put to work harvesting beans and potatoes for the Oneida County Farm Labor Association and resided in the former CCC camp at the U.S. Forest Service nursery on Highway 8 (that is now County Highway K). Thirty five American soldiers guarded the Rhinelanders camp, many of whom had been prisoners in German camps.

For the prisoners' labor, the U.S. Treasury received 55 cents an hour from the Farm Association. During the first seven months of 1945, more than \$2 million was paid to the U.S. Treasury by contractors using POWs in Wisconsin and Upper Michigan. The prisoners themselves did not receive any money, but rather were paid 80 cents a day in coupons that could be redeemed for basic items like toiletries and tobacco.

By the end of October 1945, the Rhinelanders camp and several others were closed.

In the years following the World Wars, countless Rhinelanders men - who have served in all branches of military service, many for generations - have proudly represented our community and defended our homeland.

In honor of Veterans Day, we thank you for your service.

This installment was written with the help and guidance of documents provided by the Rhinelanders Historical Society and Ralph Larson, local VFW Post member who served as a combat engineer in Germany during the Korean War.

Stay tuned for the next installment in this continuing series. Visit rivernews.com to read previous installments.

Stephanie Kuski can be reached at stephanie@rivernews.com.

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