

# Veterans Remembered—World War I 1917-1918

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The Great War, or World War I as it is now called, began in August 1914 when Germany declared war on Russia and France. Soon interlocking alliances among the great powers of Europe embroiled them in a terrible conflict that was to last for four years and kill millions of people. While the United States was officially neutral, the Allied Powers, particularly Great Britain, purchased war materials from American companies, among them the Du Pont Company, which brought a measure of prosperity to Washburn as the Barksdale Works expanded to fill war orders. Germany unleashed a submarine campaign against the convoys carrying cargoes to Great Britain and many American passengers and crew were killed. Public opinion, enraged by the loss of life and the violation of freedom of the seas, finally forced President Woodrow Wilson to ask Congress for a declaration of war against Germany on April 2 1917.

Universal conscription was among the several measures taken to mobilize the nation for war, which were approved by Congress on May 17 1917. Registration of all men ages

21 to 31 years of age (later expanded to 18 to 34) was held on June 6th, with the first quota of 67 men from Bayfield



County. The first contingent of 27 men from the county, including eight from Washburn, departed on September 9th, followed by many more until the war ended. Meanwhile, a volunteer company was organized by Hubert H. Peavey, a prominent member of the community. In early June the company was inducted into the National Guard as Company D of the Sixth Wisconsin Infantry Regiment with Peavey as Captain. The company was presented with the American flag that had belonged to Company K during the Spanish-American War, some twenty years earlier. On August 23rd after numerous celebratory banquets and enthusiastic patriotic ceremonies, the company

departed from the depot, where thousands had gathered to see them off. They spent a month at Camp Douglas in southwestern Wisconsin and then were sent with the Sixth Regiment to Camp McArthur at Waco, Texas for training and equipping for overseas duty. (Thirty-five years later people in Waco remembered those "nice boys from Wisconsin" to this writer who was stationed there during the Korean War.) Most of the men were reorganized as Company B of the military police under Captain Peavey. The remainder were assigned to a supply company, all part of the 32nd Division, the famous Red Arrow Division, composed of Wisconsin and Michigan men.

In February 1918 the 32nd Division was transported overseas. One of the ships, the *Tuscania*, carrying several units from the division, was torpedoed by a German submarine with a loss of 201 men. Asa Willey from Washburn was on the ship but survived the sinking. He was picked up by a destroyer and within a few days was back with his unit. The 32nd Division, including the men from Washburn, was in the midst of some of the hardest fighting

on the western front, and in fact was scheduled to assault a heavily fortified German position on the morning of November 11th, but the attack was cancelled at the last minute because the armistice had stopped the fighting. The division served on occupation duty in Germany for a few months and then returned home by early June 1919.

About 1,300 people from Bayfield County served in the armed forces during the war, 27 of whom died of various causes. Seven men from Washburn succumbed, three of who were killed in action. The most highly decorated soldier from Washburn was Ralph E. Swanby, who served in the Canadian Army and received several of the highest decorations for bravery from the British government.

At the end of June 1919, Washburn expressed its thanks to "the boys in khaki and blue" with a three day soldiers homecoming, a "monstrous celebration," according to the *Times*. The celebrants could not know that the terrible war whose end they were commemorating had planted seeds from which would flower an even more horrific conflict in twenty years.