

Washburn In The Great War—Part IV

On July 4 1917 American soldiers paraded in Paris, and by August 1918 there were 1,300,000 American soldiers in France. Under the command of General John J. Pershing, who resisted demands that they be sent as replacements to Allied armies, these soldiers were formed into a well trained army, the American Expeditionary Force, the A.E.F., that was the equal of the Allied and German armies.

There were many men from Washburn in the A.E.F., including in the famous 32nd Infantry Division, which was composed of men from Wisconsin and Michigan. Among them were members of a Washburn volunteer company, organized in May 1917 by Hubert H. Peavey, who was prominent in community affairs. In early June the men were mustered into the National Guard as Company D of the Sixth Wisconsin Infantry Regiment, with Peavey as captain. Signifying its ties with the marital fervor of an earlier era, the new company was presented with the American flag that had belonged to Washburn's Company K from the Spanish-American War.

The company was feted with several elaborate farewell celebrations. The first such event was held on July 30th with a banquet at the Congregational Church, after which the men marched

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to the ball park (diagonally across from the depot), two bands providing music for the parade. The program at the ball park, attended by "thousands of people" according to the Times, included the singing of patriotic songs, an invocation, a charge to the men, and a response by Captain Peavey. There followed an address entitled, "The Mothers' Gift To The Nation—Their Boys," after which the men "marched to the center of the park and stood at attention, while the lights from dozens of automobiles played upon them." Another speech followed during which "women dressed in white distributed [housewife] bags to the soldiers." The Joan of Arc Circle of the Red Cross, composed of "young ladies of the community," presented a "beautiful flag" to the company, and then the men were "presented with beautiful bouquets of flowers by dozens of pretty school girls, attired in white." The program ended with a benediction and "the audience singing the Star Spangled Banner, while soldiers and audience stood at atten-

tion." In the evening "a grand military ball was held at the Opera House and was attended by one of the largest throng that has ever assembled at a ball in this city." The Times declared that this "Rousing Farewell Given Boys who will Defend Democracy" would "Go Down in City History."

On August 23rd, after having been billeted in Washburn for five weeks, the men of Company D were guests at one last celebratory feast before departing by train for Camp Douglas. The Times described the scene at the depot as a "solemn and impressive one as mothers, sisters and sweethearts and fathers, brothers and admiring friends bid the boys goodbye and wished them good luck and an early return to the city." The train stopped in Ashland and Hayward to pick up other companies, then in Eau Claire for lunch, arriving at Camp Douglas at 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon.

After training for a month at Camp Douglas, Company D, along with the other companies of the Sixth Regiment, was moved to Camp MacArthur at Waco, Texas. There units from Wisconsin and Michigan were amalgamated into the 32nd Division, intensive training took place, and the division was equipped for overseas service. In January and February the division moved to east coast

camps, then was transported overseas to France. The Tuscania, one of the ships carrying several units of the 32nd Division, the Tuscania, was sunk by a German submarine on February 5th off the Irish coast, with a loss of 201 American troops. Four men from Washburn were on board, but survived the sinking.

In France the division underwent further training, then occupied a sector of the line at Alsace, where it received a baptism of fire in patrol skirmishes in no-man's land. Subsequently the division fought in major actions at Aisne-Marne, Oise-Aisne, and Meuse-Argonne. In letters to the men who fought in these battles, rather than making themselves into heroes for what by any measure was heroic, reported their experiences with amazing nonchalance—for example, Fred Fige reported, "I am lucky to ever get back for its funny I didn't get killed a dozen times over as I was on five different fronts and in some of the hardest battles that the Americans were in. Went over the top five times during the six months that I was fighting. I saw hundreds of men killed so it was a common sight to walk by dead bodies." The French bestowed the sobriquet, Les Terrible, on the 32nd Division for its fortitude in these battles.