

# The Last Man's Club of Battery B

*There was more than one "first shot" in World War II.*

By Jack K. Johnson

You probably know that the 34th "Red Bull" Infantry Division was the first U.S. division to embark for Europe in World War Two and that its soldiers fought with distinction in North Africa and Italy. You may even know that the first American artillery fire directed against German forces came from a 34th Division battery of Minnesota National Guardsmen. To be specific, it was at Medjez-El-Bab, Tunisia, North Africa, on November 19, 1942, and the honors went to B Battery, 175th Field Artillery Battalion. The shell casing of the first round fired, inscribed with the names of battery members, is on display at the Minnesota Military Museum. Four surviving members of that unit were hon-



The First Section of B Battery, 151st Field Artillery, in Northern Ireland pose with their British 25-pounder howitzer in June 1942. Front row, from left: Donald Reynolds, Frank Ruebl, Glenn Wishert, Louis Dobbleman, James O'Neil. In back: William Brisley, Lawrence Swanson, Alfred Wilson, John Anderson.

## Points of Interest

Civil War exhibit receives grant 6

Curator's Notes 5

Artifact donations 6

Memorials and Contributions 7

Membership blank 8

**ALLIES**

ored last year in a special ceremony at Camp Ripley.

The division went to war by way of Northern Ireland, where it trained in 1942. That part of its chronicle is frequently skimmed over in historical accounts of the division's service. But the whole chronicle needs to be woven as a single fabric. The stories from Northern Ireland are tied to the others and are no less interesting.

Do you know, for example, about the *other* first round? B Battery, 175 FA Bn may have fired the first American round against German forces, but what about the practice rounds? Who delivered the very first artillery fire by American forces in the European Theater? For that, the honors went to B Battery, 151st Field Artillery Battalion, 34th Infantry Division.

The entire division did not head for Europe at once. It shipped out in three separate contingents over a five-month period. The 151st was in the first contingent, arriving three and a half months before the division's other artillery units.<sup>1</sup> At 12:30 a.m. on January 15, 1942—roughly eleven months after being activated for a year of “precautionary” training, and barely five weeks after America's declaration of war—the men of the 151st boarded a converted British steamer HMTS *Straithaird*, along with elements of the 133rd Infantry Regiment, Co. A of the 109th Medical Battalion, and a detachment of the 34th Military Police. At 7:45 a.m. it departed New York Harbor, formed up with a convoy, and sailed into the cold, gray seas of the North Atlantic. Not until mid-voyage did the men learn that their destination was Belfast, Northern Ireland, and that they were in the advance elements of a new American Expeditionary Force. On January 26 the regiment disembarked at Belfast. A special welcoming ceremony was held at the dock to honor the occasion and the first off the gangplank was PFC Milburn Henke of Hutchinson, Minnesota—officially the first GI to set foot in the European Theater.<sup>2</sup>

Why Northern Ireland? The British had an entire army stationed there as a defensive measure. The Irish Free State (Republic of Ireland) had declared itself neutral and refused to permit British troops on its soil. Proud, but militarily weak, the Irish Free State would be no match for Germany should Hitler decide to use it as a springboard into England. By stationing American troops in Northern Ireland, the British Army was freed up for service elsewhere.

The 151st was initially housed at Camp Ballarena, about 50 miles northwest of Belfast, on the grounds of a large country estate (Ballarena was an adjacent village). The enlisted men and junior officers stayed in Nissen huts made of corrugated steel (similar to a quanset hut). The main town in the area was Coleraine, County Londonderry.

Training proceeded in good order and there were ample opportunities to mix with the locals, who liked the Americans and appreciated having them on their side in the war. Belfast was a popular destination on weekends and three-day passes, but GIs from the 151st became “regulars” in the town of Coleraine.

The battalion had left its outmoded 75mm field guns behind when it shipped out. Shortly after arrival in Northern Ireland, they were equipped with British 25-pounder howitzers (the projectile weighed 25 pounds; hence the name). On February 21, the first service practice was successfully carried out at firing ranges located in the Sperrin Mountains. A shell casing was kept as a souvenir by B Battery. A formal demonstration was conducted a few weeks later. The division commander, Major General Russell P. Hartle, and his aide, Captain William O. Darby, were present to observe the firing, along with several senior British officers. It was a noteworthy event—big news in the *Belfast Telegraph* on March 12, 1942.<sup>3</sup>

The 34th coalesced and organized itself, and with each successive phase of training, the division's units switched to new locations throughout the countryside. The 151st stayed at Ballarena until late May. Then it moved south to the Tynan Abbey estate, County Armagh, near the Irish Free State border, where the

men engaged in tactical field maneuvers. Early that summer, the B Battery commander, Capt. Eugene E. Surdyk, brought the shell casing from their first practice fire—purported to be the first by American troops in Europe in World War Two—to Dan Hall Christie, a Coleraine businessman who owned a jewelry store. He asked Christie to have the shell casing inscribed with the names of B Battery's 116 officers and men, and to hold it until Surdyk was able to get back to Coleraine and pick it up.

As summer gave way to autumn, the 151st moved again, setting up camp at the Castle Coole estate, near Enniskillen, County Fermanagh. The training routine consisted of battery exercises, physical conditioning, road marches, more service practices in the Sperrin Mountains, firing at an antitank range adjacent to Lough Neagh (the largest lake in the British Isles), and movement alert drills at unexpected times that required the men to quickly load all their organizational equipment and personal gear onto trucks ready for immediate departure.

The movement drills were aggravating, but everyone knew the real thing was imminent. The division's 168th Regimental Combat Team had been in North Africa since November 8, 1942, as part of Operation TORCH. The real alert finally came on December 12. Within two days, the men of the 151st were in Oulton Park, a permanent military camp about 25 miles east of Liverpool, England. They set sail for North Africa on Christmas Day, and on February 16, 1943, moved their British field pieces into position east of a hill mass named Djebel Trozza, Tunisia, in the northern part of the II Corps sector. The next day they fired on a group of approaching German tanks, setting three on fire. Once again these were "first shots," except this time they weren't practice rounds. They had tasted battle. The 151st was in combat.

In 1961, long after the war had passed, now-Colonel Surdyk (he had stayed in the National Guard after the war) finally returned to Coleraine to renew old acquaintances and reclaim the engraved shell casing. Mr. Christie had carefully looked after it all those years and happily gave it back to Surdyk, along with a bottle of aged malt whiskey distilled in Coleraine. "It was really their trophy," Christie later said. Christie received a letter the following year from Surdyk, who told him that the whiskey was now sealed in the shell casing. The battery had agreed at its reunion that the whiskey would remain in the casing until only three members survive. "Then those three worthies will share the contents," wrote Surdyk. The



The shell casing, whiskey and guidon for Battery B of the 151st Field Artillery are currently on display at the Minnesota Military Museum's special 34th Infantry Division exhibit.

## ALLIES

battery's guidon flag was also placed inside.

The idea of a "last man's club" emerged during the American Civil War and came to full fruition during World War One. The premise was simple: a bottle of liquor was acquired and the last man alive from a group of veterans would drink it in honor of the others. In this tradition, B Battery created its own Last Man's Club, comprised of the men who had trained together in Northern Ireland in 1942.

The battery held its final reunion in Minneapolis in 2005. In 2007, one of the last survivors, Bob Martin, donated the prized casing, whiskey, and guidon to the Minnesota Military Museum. A cross had been engraved on the casing next to the names of deceased members, and there were few names without crosses. Sadly, Bob passed away a few months later and the organization disbanded. The bottle had been opened and some of the whiskey was missing. Bob told the museum's curator, Doug Bekke, that the cork was damaged and some spilled, but that none had been consumed by the vets. As Bekke is quick to point out, "Is this so? We'll never know." But of their first shots and subsequent role in halting Hitler's grotesque plan for Europe, there is no doubt. Let's drink to that.

### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Division Artillery Headquarters, and the division's other field artillery battalions — the 125th, 175th, and 185th — did not arrive until May 10.

<sup>2</sup> The Straithaird remained at anchor in the harbor while four tenders ferried the troops to two Belfast docks. As it turned out, a group of unnamed GI's disembarked unannounced at one of the docks while an official welcoming ceremony was taking place at the other. They marched past the ceremony just as Private Henke was stepping ashore, but history has declared that Henke was first off the boat.

<sup>3</sup> The British 25-pounders were used by the unit until May 3, 1943, when new U.S. 105mm howitzers were finally delivered.

### Sources:

"Coloraine Whiskey Sealed in Historic American Shell-Case." *Ulster Commentary*, April 1962, 8-9. E-mail attachment from Noel Lynch, March 22, 2010.

Henderson, Ian. "After the Battle" No. 34 (London: Plaistow Press Magazines, 1981) 1.

Hougen, John H. *History of the Famous 34th Infantry Division* (Nashville: Battery Press, 1949).

Lynch, Noel, of Coloraine, Northern Ireland, e-mail messages, March 22 and 26, and April 26, 2010.

Perra, Arsini J. (ed.). *WWII Diary of B Battery, 151st Field Artillery Battalion*. A post-war compilation of diary entries by B Btry members Richard Wamsley, Eugene Engstrom, Donald Longman, John Brunette, John Hageboeck, Hubert Northwehr, and Arsini Perra. Mimeographed manuscript.

Perra, Arsini J. (ed.). *Narrative History of the 151st Field Artillery Battalion, World War Two*. Mimeographed manuscript.

Vojta, Francis. *The Gopher Gunners: A History of Minnesota's 151st Field Artillery* (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing, 1995).

Wagner, Bud. *And There Shall Be War*. WWII Diaries and Memories of Bud Wagner, 151st FA Bn. (Twig, MN: Wilmer Wagner and Lloyd Wagner Press, 2000).

Westover, John G. *Selected Memories, Vol. II*. Unpublished memoir, June 15, 1990.

## Curator's Notes

By Doug Bekke

Work continues in preparation for the museum's new exhibit on Minnesota's two Civil Wars that will open in the summer of 2011. Steve Osman has done a great job raising funds and finding artifacts.

On several occasions I have been approached by people who had relatives in the Civil War. If they had a photograph or artifacts I offered them the opportunity to make their ancestor a part of the exhibit. This not only honors an ancestor, it enables us to show the faces of people involved and artifacts that were actually used by Minnesotans in the conflicts. This will be the largest special exhibit in the Museum's history. It will also be the costliest, and it will be the most difficult to find appropriate artifacts to exhibit. Your support is needed.

In late March I had a volunteer weekend at Camp Ripley. Ken Buettner, Doug Thompson, Merl Fletcher, Ken Fasching, Todd Hintz, Marty Belland, and Ross Hedin all did a great job processing artifacts and modifying several of the museum's permanent display cases. The display case modifications will provide more space in the permanent Civil War and Spanish American War exhibits. The changes are long overdue and it was great to have people who are pros do the needed work. All of the exhibit cases for the Civil War exhibit will need to be built this summer and early fall and I am looking for volunteers with wood working skills to help build the cabinets.

Several of the volunteers were working on processing artifacts. In theory, this work may seem simple, but the reality is that it is very difficult to find people with the necessary set of skills to do the work properly. I can often find people who want to help, but finding people with the needed clerical and organizational skills -- and who also have a knowledge of the artifacts -- is rare.

Recently the museum hosted a tour by the Minnesota Heritage Arms Collectors Association. These people have spent a great part of their lives working on a hobby or in some cases a business related to antique weapons or militaria. Each person has a huge pool of knowledge relating to his or her area of interest. I encouraged them to think about applying some of their knowledge to honor, educate, and to help preserve the memory of the military service of Minnesotans by volunteering at the Minnesota Military Museum.

In the past I have done oral histories with Minnesota veterans. They are a lot of work but very important. I received great transcription support from Laurie Johnson, Linda Cameron, and Cindy Hofeld. Thanks very much to them for their great volunteer work on this important mission.

Many veterans have produced their own oral or written histories of their time in the military. The museum would like to have copies of these documents to preserve as a record of Minnesotans who served. I strongly encourage veterans of the current conflicts in the Middle East to record their stories while they are fresh in their minds and to send copies of their stories and photographs to the museum. Today's Minnesotans in the military are doing a great job and their stories need to be preserved to stand side-by-side with the stories of Minnesotans from earlier eras.



## Civil War Exhibit Receives Legacy Grant

Scheduled to open in June 2011, Minnesota in the Civil War is the largest and most ambitious exhibit in the museum's history. Seven uniformed and fully equipped mannequins will greet visitors to engage them in the varied story of the state's soldier and civilian participants. Last fall we requested and were awarded a Minnesota Historical and Cultural Grant of \$7,000 to procure costuming. Vice President for Programs Stephen Osman is scouring web sites, catalogs and reenactor contacts to locate used authentic gear, including a complete outfit for an 1862 Dakota Indian warrior.

One lucky break: A donor provided a nearly ready-to-go Civil War widow figure that will poignantly portray the costs of the war. Watch for more reports as the new exhibit takes shape and please contact us if you have ideas for our ongoing fundraising effort.



The grieving widow will be part of the Civil War exhibit.

## Artifact Donation Honor Roll (December 16, 2009 through April 30, 2010)

*The museum gratefully acknowledges donations of artifacts from the following:*

Roger E. Anderson ▪ Bernard J. Cahill ▪ Lynn Durocher ▪ Tim Hannan ▪ Laurie Johnson ▪ Mary Knutson ▪ Dale Lease ▪ Paula Lendobeja ▪ Stewart C. Mills ▪ Steve Osman ▪ Richard J. Reigner ▪ Phil Riley ▪ Kevin Rofidal ▪ Jo Teare ▪ General John Vessey ▪ Keith Voller

## Artifact Donations (December 16, 2009 through April 30, 2010)

**Uniforms:** Breeches, wool ▪ Cap, garrison, US Army Air Corps (2) ▪ Cap, USA officer's service dress ▪ Cap, overseas (2) ▪ Coat, US Army Air Force officer's service dress ▪ Coveralls, US Coast Guard ▪ Hat, USA officer's visor ▪ Jacket, WWII Canadian battle dress ▪ Leggings, wool ▪ Overcoat, wool (2) ▪ Rain suit, US Coast Guard ▪ Shirt, LS wool ▪ Trousers, wool ▪ Uniform blouse, wool (2)

**Equipment:** Helmet, WWII German police ▪ Helmet, US Coast Guard construction

**Miscellaneous:** Bible, soldier's ▪ Books ▪ Booklets ▪ Aircraft diorama ▪ Collar, WWI white ▪ Collar brass ▪ Cord, hat, USA infantry blue ▪ U.S. flag (2) ▪ Letters ▪ Magazines ▪ Mannequin ▪ Canadian medals ▪ U.S. Medals; ▪ Newspapers ▪ Papers ▪ Patches ▪ Photographs ▪ Photo collage ▪ Postcard booklets ▪ Poster, framed WWI British ▪ Poster, shipping container identification, 34 BCT ▪ Scrapbook

**Weapons and related items:** Sword, Civil War era;

## Please Notify Us of Address Changes

Please notify the museum if your mailing address changes so we can keep our mailing lists current. Changes in mailing rules recently enacted by the U.S. Postal Service require that any of our newsletters with incorrect addresses be returned and we must pay the postage. In order to keep mailing costs down, we must make every effort to maintain our mailing lists properly.

Your assistance is greatly appreciated.

## Memorials Dec 16, 2009 – April 30, 2010

Given by:  
Richard and Betty Hayes  
194th Tank Regt. Assn.  
Kenneth Simurdiak  
Gerald J. Ryan  
Martha King  
Dale & Gay Knutson  
Sidney K. Schmuckler  
Ray and Shirley Lunde  
194th Tank Regt. Assn.

In Memory of:  
Michael R. Farris  
Michael R. Farris  
Michael O'Hanlon  
Mike Ryan  
Donald F. Pitt  
Donald F. Pitt  
Marvin S. Fineberg  
Stuart A. Lindman  
Francis Jankie

<u><b>In Memoriam</b></u>	
In Memory of:	_____
Given by:	_____
Address:	_____
City:	_____ State: _____ ZIP: _____
<u><b>Please indicate here name and address of member of family to whom we can send notice of your gift:</b></u>	
Name:	_____
Address:	_____
City:	_____ State: _____ ZIP: _____
<b>Make checks payable to:</b> Minnesota Military Museum 15000 Hwy. 115, Camp Ripley Little Falls MN 56345	
<u><b>Gifts are deductible for income tax purposes</b></u>	

## Contributions Honor Roll (December 16, 2009 – April 30, 2010)

**Renewing Members:** Ronald D. Andreen ▪ Louis O. Bode ▪ Henry T. Capiz ▪ Newell Chester ▪ Donald Hauck ▪ Donald Jensen ▪ Earl M. Jensen ▪ Walter Kosel ▪ Orland Kreitlow ▪ Howard Larsen ▪ Earl Lillestrand ▪ Lois Luker ▪ Dale N. Mangskau ▪ Jean McDonald ▪ Ron Miller ▪ Richard Morey ▪ William Morgan ▪ Bruce Porvaznik ▪ Susan Rasmussen ▪ John Sjogren ▪ LaVon M. Skoog ▪ George J. Steiner ▪ Fred Steinhauser ▪ Robert G. Swetz, Sr. ▪ Daniel J. Vandenberg

**New Members:** Alan M. & Ann M. Anderson ▪ Shawn R. Murphy ▪ Andrew Ostapenko

**American Legion:** Post 102, Anoka ▪ Post 20 Auxiliary, Crookston ▪ Post 398, Mound ▪ Post 473, Rice

**VFW:** Post 1757 Auxiliary, Cook ▪ Post 425, Hopkins ▪ Post 6891 Auxiliary, McIntosh ▪ Post 3289 Auxiliary, New York Mills ▪ Post 5462, Waconia ▪ Post 5098 Auxiliary, Westbrook ▪

**Donations:** Donald N. Anderson ▪ Eugene Andreotti ▪ Robert Ballou ▪ William Cheeseman ▪ Gage Colby ▪ Benita Egan ▪ Janese Evans ▪ Dirk L. Gasterland ▪ Richard and Betty Hayes ▪ Audrey Hohncke ▪ James Hovda ▪ Robert Hystad ▪ Kenneth C. Johnson ▪ Timothy Kennedy ▪ David Larson ▪ Betty Masoner ▪

**ALLIES**

**Membership Application for the Military Historical Society of Minnesota**  
*Yes, I want to preserve Minnesota's military history for future generations!*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Branch of Service (if applicable): \_\_\_\_\_ Rank: \_\_\_\_\_ Active or Retired (circle one)  
 E-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

**Membership Categories:**

<b>Individual:</b>	<b>Organization:</b>	<b>Corporate:</b>
____ Regular (\$25/yr.) _____	Regular (\$500) _____	Regular (\$1,000)
____ Sustaining (\$50/yr.) _____	Sustaining (\$1,000) _____	Sustaining (\$3,000)
____ Life (\$350+) (or 4 X \$90)		

All memberships are annual except Life, Organization and Corporate Memberships. Contributors of \$350 or more will be recognized on a plaque in the museum lobby.

Enclosed is my tax-deductible check for \$ \_\_\_\_\_ made payable to the Minnesota Military Museum.

Please mail to: **Military Historical Society of Minnesota, c/o Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy. 115, Little Falls MN 56345-4173.**  
**Phone: 320-632-7374**  
**E-mail: mnmuseum@yahoo.com**

*Thank You for your Support!*

**Allies** is published for the members and friends of the Military Historical Society of Minnesota.

- Nicholas Ostapenko, **President**
- David L. Hanson, **Executive Director**
- Doug Bekke, **Curator**
- Leland P. Smith, **Archivist**
- Sandy Erickson, **Administrator**
- Al Zdon, **Editor**

The **Military Historical Society of Minnesota** is a nonprofit 501 (c) (3) organization, registered with the federal and state governments. Donations are tax deductible.

**Museum contact information:**

**Fax: 320-632-7797**  
**Email: mnmuseum@yahoo.com**  
**Telephone: 320-632-7374**  
**DSN: 871-7374**

NONPROFIT ORG.  
 U.S. POSTAGE  
 PAID  
 LITTLE FALLS, MN  
 PERMIT NO. 40

Return Service Requested

**Military Historical Society of Minnesota**  
**C/O Minnesota Military Museum**  
**Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy. 115**  
**Little Falls MN 56345-4173**

**TO:**