

REMEMBER WHEN · BILL SHANNON

Armory building on McKinley Avenue a part of local lore

I remember when I walked with my dad and Ed McKay from our home on Spalding Street down to the armory on McKinley Avenue when I was about 7 years old.

There was a petting zoo which the Connecticut National Guard had displayed on the parade floor. There was a camel and a brown pony there plus rabbits, chickens and other animals.

My dad had been a top-kick sergeant during the 1930s and into the '40s. Ed McKay had been the commander of the armory for most of that period with the rank of colonel.

My dad took me down to the cellar where there was a firing range for rifle and the classic 1911 issue Colt 45s. It must have been awfully loud when used.

Dad said that the artillery members needed to know how to fire the small guns and the 105s they had.

In the year 1642, Captain John Underhill formed a militia unit to protect settlers from native Americans who posed a threat. The militia continued to do their duty in various ways in the protection of their fellow settlers during the French and Indian Wars as well as their service in the American Revolution, especially at the Battle of Long Island in late August 1776.

This military unit fought in the Civil War at: Goldsboro, N.C. 1862; Battle of Bull Run, 1862 (under Norwich General Daniel Tyler), and at other battles in South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, Cold Harbor, Va., and St. Petersburg, Va., under the command of Gen. Ulysses S. Grant.

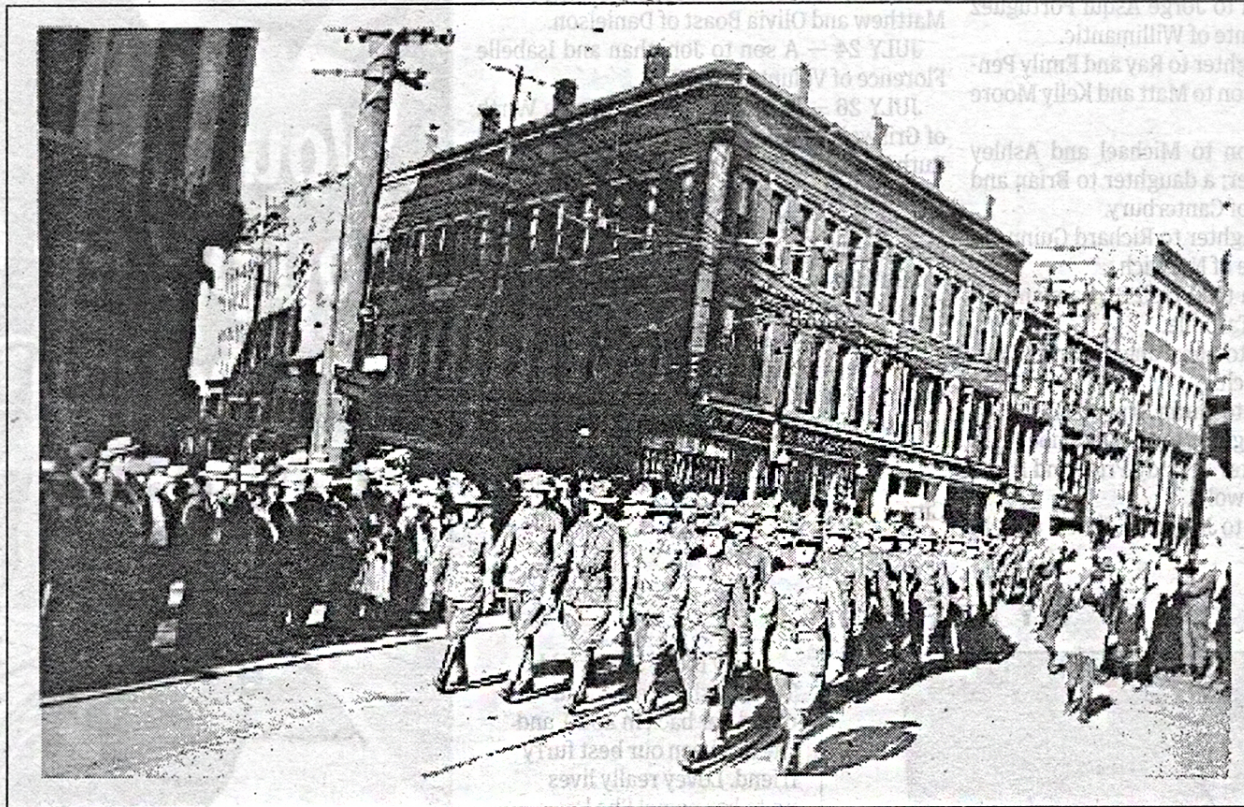
Prior to World War I, the 192 Field Artillery was known as the Coastal Artillery of the Connecticut National Guard. Aug. 25 and 26, 1913, Norwich Bulletin news items were notifying the patrons that members of this artillery group would be active at the Laurel Hill firing range in all manners of small arms shooting skills. This range was located deep in the forest away from populated areas.

In 1917 the units within the organization were divided into different batteries including coast artillery. Those units were transported to Europe and fought in: Aisne-Marne, Champagne, Oise-Aisne, and the Meuse-Argonne campaigns.

192nd is born

In 1921, following the 1920 amendment to the National Defense Act of 1916, there were 18 National Guard divisions. The regimental designation was changed to the 192nd Field Artillery Regiment, 43 Division.

The regimental headquarters were set up at the New London Armory which housed Battery A. Battery B was headquartered at the castle-like structure of the Norwich Armory on McKinley Avenue. This unit would spend time at Stone Ranch in Niantic for basic firing of their two 105mm howitzers.



Soldiers during World War I parade down the streets in downtown Norwich before heading off to battle.

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Their two-week yearly encampment would be at Pine Camp in upper New York State or at the 11,000-acre Fort Ethan Allen in Vermont, depending on the requirement of the National Guard headquarters in Hartford.

Fort Ethan Allen had been a cavalry headquarters for the New England area.

The 43rd Division was nicknamed the "Winged Victory Division." During World War II, it participated in the Pacific theater of operations with battles in Guadalcanal, New Solomon Islands, and Luzon in the Philippines. This infantry division represented units from the New England states. It received a Presidential Citation for its actions in the Pacific Theater of Operations. Following World War II, the National Guard reconstructed and evolved.

But first, the 43rd Division went to Europe to beef up the United States Army presence against the Soviet Union during the Korean War. The 43rd Division was made into a brigade, and the 192nd Field Artillery was inactivated on Sept. 1, 1993.

Back again

Just two years after the Pentagon disbanded the 192nd Field Artillery, they reactivated it.

This group of men and women assisted in dozens of state emergencies including the Great Blizzard of 1978 where their skill assisted state and local authorities in moving the vast amount of snow which filled the streets of our city.

One story that caught my attention, which my father had told me, interested me. In August 1935, in northern New York State, a war game was played out at Pine Plains (Pine Camp), now called Fort Drum, home of the 10th Mountain Division. This was to be the largest peacetime maneuvers ever held with 36,500 troops from all over the Northeast.

States' national guard units arrived by trains every 15 minutes.

The base was originally set up at Sackett Harbor and was a command center for security on the Canadian border. It was an important center for training troops during the War of 1812. Barracks were built and later enlarged. Troops were also trained there during the Civil War.

Grant's son visits

In 1908, Army Brigade General Frederick Dent Grant, son of Gen. U.S. Grant, visited the site and was impressed, and he saw the potential of Pine Plains as a major training ground for soldiers in the Northeast.

The two-star general in charge of the war games found out days before that a three-star Russian general had been invited to observe the maneuvers. The American general was raised to a three-star rank temporarily so that the two generals would be of the same rank.

Other problems arose with the supply train. The arsenal sent the wrong shells for some of the 105mm howitzer's units. All units brought what they had but there was to be a live firing demonstration as part of the 36-hour dura-

tion of the war games. Some of the 105 mm units, such as Norwich's 192 F. A. Battery B, had received 37mm shells at Pine Camp.

Making it work

There was a scramble for 37mm artillery pieces. The munitions for the 105s were given to the field pieces nearest the viewing stand, and 37mm guns, stripped of their carriage, were strapped to the barrels of the remaining 105s much farther away from the viewing stand, so all gun crews could participate.

The 155 mm artillery pieces (called 'The Long Toms') had no munition problems for the coast artillery units which were also involved.

For this exercise the National Guard rented 700-plus acres of farm land which were left badly marred. This land was finally purchased by the National Guard and even added onto at the beginning of World War II. Five villages and 525 families were displaced.

Eventually more than 75,000 acres were added onto Pine Camp where General George Patton's 4th armored division trained (Gen. Creighton Abrams was one of his battalion commanders). In 1951, Pine Camp was designated Camp Drum after Lt. General Hugh A. Drum.

My father was proud of his service in the 192nd Field Artillery Battery B during his time in the 1930s and early 1940s.

Bill Shannon is a retired Norwich Public Schools teacher and a lifelong resident of Norwich.