

The forgotten soldiers

Polar Bears recall Russian duty

By LOUISE OKRUTSKY

When they left Battle Creek to take their part in the Great War, the 320th Infantry was known as Detroit's Own. By the time they returned, they had survived a year in a lone Russian outpost and earned the nickname Polar Bears.

Fifty-nine years after they returned from helping the czar's forces during the Russian Revolution, the Polar Bears met again to remember their dead and greet old friends during Memorial Day in Southfield.

Many of their memories center around the year they spent fighting against the communist forces in Russia, long after the signing of the armistice ended World War I.

"I don't think we did a bit of good," said Polar Bear Association President Alfred Larsen of Farmington Hills.

"We just lost a lot of good American lives. There were more who died than the 186 bodies they brought back."

At first the group was sent to the area near Archangel in the Arctic to prevent the Germans from establishing submarine bases in the area after the Russians had withdrawn from the war.

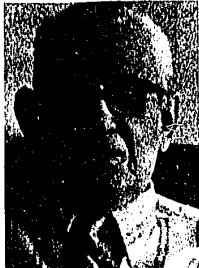
In accordance with war time procedure, the men were unaware of their destination when they left Liverpool, England for the battleground.

"WE SHOULD have been tipped off when they gave us heavy underwear before we left England," Larsen said.

When they saw icebergs, they knew they were headed away from the major battleground.

Midway in their tour of duty, the troops began to notice they were fighting a different sort of war. The German adversary slowly was replaced by communist troops.

By Christmas 1918, they were sure an armistice had been signed, Larsen



ALFRED LARSEN

remembered. The news of the pact ending the war reached them about three months after the event.

Hopelessly outnumbered by the opposing forces, the troops kept retreating to a bay north of Archangel where ships were waiting to take them to Bresk, France.

"Our casualties grew after the Armistice. It was a real war," Larsen remembered.

They were embroiled in the Russian Revolution and became the targets of the communists, who wanted them out of the country. The Polar Bears fought to help the White Russians, troops remaining loyal to the czar.

ALTHOUGH Larsen condemns the communist movement, he is in sympathy with a need for a change at the time in Russia.

"I believe they did need some change. Their mode of living was very poor with the peasants," he said.

"The troops became acquainted with the villagers around Archangel when

they billeted for the night in the settlements.

Sometimes, to help the men catch fish, the soldiers would throw a grenade into the river and watch as it rained fish for the villagers.

Each village retained its ties with customs from the past. Upon entering a house, guests would see two pictures on the walls.

"There would be a picture of Christ and a picture of the czar," Larsen said. "And the czar would be the one on top."

Few of the villagers were educated enough to count. They were unsure of their own age.

"One day a man would be 65 and then you'd visit him again and he'd tell you he was 80. They didn't know," Larsen said.

Each village had three churches. Many of Larsen's comrades were buried under the auspices of a small Greek Orthodox church near Archangel.

MANY MORE were lucky to find a shallow grave in the woods.

In 1920 the Polar Bears led another expedition into Russia. This time the 10-man commission that made up the force was charged with finding the bodies of men who had died in a little-known facet of the Great War. The commission came back with 186 bodies. Many more remain in anonymous graves.

In 1929, the group erected a Polar Bear monument in White Chapel Cemetery in Troy to commemorate the men who died.

The years have whittled away the number of men who remember the dead in White Chapel. Last year, about 50 of them died, leaving 199 members of the group who are known to be alive.

The average age of the survivors is 65 or 67, according to Larsen, who is 83.

The draft age was 21-31 during World War I. Larsen was not quite 22 when he was sent into the army.

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