

The forgotten soldiers

'Polar Bears' remember cold Russian war effort

By KATIE KERWIN

Sixty years after they returned to Michigan from Russia, the Polar Bears reunited Monday in Troy.

The World War I veterans were the only Americans to ever fight on Russian soil.

They returned in 1919, marching at Belle Isle on their July 4 homecoming. Fifteen of the veterans, aged 84-91, gathered at the Troy Hilton to reminisce and celebrate their anniversary.

Fred Sternburg, 84, remembers leaving behind the Russian boy who had been his friend and interpreter.

"We called him Jack. He was 9 years old, but he was a big boy for his age," Sternburg said. "His father didn't have work. He came to live with us in the barracks."

"Inside of a month, he could speak better English than I could. He was my orderly and attendant when I would go to hospitals. He took charge of everything," the former Army barber recounted fondly.

"His mother wanted me to take him back to the United States, so he could get an education and come back and help them. We got as far as the docks to take the boat, when we sailed for France in 1919."

"I had a uniform made for him," Sternburg said. But the ship's captain foiled his plan to sneak the young Russian, disguised as an American soldier, back home on the troop transport.

"They wouldn't take him."

"The last I saw of him, he was standing on the dock crying," he said sadly.

SOME OF THE VETERANS had happier memories of bright moments during the war. Matt Grahek, 89, remembers a carefree afternoon spent ice skating with some young Russian women.

"I used to love to ice skate when I was young," Grahek said. "One day when I went downtown, I saw the rink. Acquiring skates and shoes to put them on took some doing, he said."

"The next problem was how I was

going to ask a woman to skate with me in Russian," Grahek continued. A fellow American coached him on a few polite phrases. Encountering two young women in furs skating at the rink, he said he uttered the request in Russian.

"They laughed and answered, 'Why yes. Certainly' in fine English. I felt about this big," Grahek said, holding his thumb and forefinger a few inches apart.

The three spent an enjoyable afternoon skating and he promised to meet the women again the next day. But the war cut short their relationship. Returning to his barracks, Grahek learned his outfit was leaving for the front immediately. "I never saw them again," he said regretfully.

Grahek points to a snowy, bundled-up figure in an old photograph displayed at the reunion. "That's me," he said. "Where else would you wear dog fur mitts?" he replied.

Getting used to the Russian bathing customs also took a while, Grahek said.

"We went a long time between baths there," he explained. While in a town with a bathhouse similar to Scandinavian saunas, he said the whole squad would crowd inside to wash.

"You can imagine eight naked guys standing in there and in walks a woman with a couple buckets of water," he said. "She wasn't the least embarrassed, and made several trips to fill the barrel in the bathhouse."

"After a hot bath, you took a bucket of cold water and doused yourself."

THE POLAR BEARS left the U.S. for England in summer of 1918. Traveling by boat from Newcastle, they sailed to Shmurbur, said John Clock, 83. Some were stationed in the town of Bakartiza, across the river from Archangel.

Many of the veterans can still recite the precise arrival and departure dates for all of their moves. Some days stand out more clearly than others, though.

"I spent my birthday in a large going up the river," recalled James MacDougall, 85. He was on his way to

the front almost immediately after arrival.

"The biggest battle I was in was a month and 17 days after the war was over," MacDougall said. "Nine of our men were killed and 43 wounded. We didn't know the war was over."

"We lost 42 men one morning," Clock added. That battle took place in January 1919.

News of the Nov. 11 armistice reached the Polar Bears by mid-January, but skirmishes with the Bolsheviks continued until March.

The northern Russian winter also made a strong impression on many of the Americans. They didn't name themselves after the arctic bear for nothing.

"We hit about 62 degrees below zero," MacDougall said. "We stayed in the Russian houses mostly. We were pretty well dressed."

"The ice got so thick on the Dwina River that they could run the trains on the river," Clock said. "It froze right down to the river bed."

The soldiers took turns going down to the front, 100 miles south. Trains carried them about halfway, but horse-drawn sleighs were the only way to cross the final 54 miles to the front.

"It took 24 hours driving through the woods," Clock said. "Those Russian ponies were the best horses I ever saw."

The frigid weather froze the ponies' breath instantly, he said. "A long beard

of icicles would be hanging from the horse's mouth."

Cold winter nights made many Russians sleep on top of their ovens, Clock said. "They had brick ovens at each house — big ovens where they did all their cooking," he said. "The bricks would keep hot all night long."

Many of the Americans learned a little Russian during their stay, veterans said. "We could carry on a conversation — make ourselves understood," Clock said.


ONLY ABOUT 60 of the 5,500 Polar Bears are still alive. Most of the unit were from Michigan and Wisconsin. For some of those at Monday's gather-

ing, it was the first reunion in 60 years.

"It's the first I've come for," said 86-year-old George Penoyer. He and his wife, Alma, attended the anniversary get-together at the request of Stanley

Bozich, organizer for the reunion. "I thought we should have this gathering," said Bozich, director of Michigan's Own, a military museum in Southfield. American troops who fought the Bolsheviks in 1918-19 have never gotten much publicity, he said. "They are the forgotten men."


Troy was a natural choice for a meeting place, he said. "The Polar Bear monument and the military cemetery (White Chapel Memorial) are in Troy."



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Werba takes post as Mensa chief

Detroit public relations consultant Gabriel Werba will be the new chairman of the American Mensa, the 30,000 member high I.Q. society.

Werba, 49, took office July 1 at Mensa's annual meeting in Kansas City, Missouri. He was elected to a two-year term.

A member since 1954, the Farmington Hills resident was formerly vice chairman.

Mensa is an international society, based in London, with some 40,000 members in 14 countries. Membership requires an I.Q., as measured by intelligence tests, at or above the 98th percentile of the general population.

Werba is executive vice president of the Anthony Franco, Inc. He directs the firm's investor relations activities on behalf of publicly owned clients.

Werba graduated from the University of Texas in 1949 with a B.A. in journalism at the age of 18. He did postgraduate work at New York University's graduate school of business administration and New York University's school of law.

Some 88,000 persons in the Detroit metropolitan area are statistically eligible for membership in Mensa. Those interested should write to Mensa, Dept. 79, 1701 West Third Street, Brooklyn, New York 11223.

Tennis or golf, anyone?

The Farmington Hills Parks and Recreation Department is sponsoring a second season of golf lessons for beginners to learn the basic fundamentals or improve their game.

Classes are 50 minutes in length, twice each week (Tuesdays and Thursdays) for four weeks. The session begins on July 17 and continues through August 9.

Participants must purchase a bucket of balls for each lesson. In case of bad weather, all classes will be made up.

The fee for lessons are: \$14 per person; \$12 per person with two individuals of the same family; and \$10 per

person with three or more individuals of the same family.

For registration, contact the Farmington Hills Parks and Recreation Department at 51555 Eleven Mile Road.

THE RECREATION department is also sponsoring a second season of beginning tennis lessons to learn basic fundamentals.

Classes are 50 minutes in length, twice each week for four weeks. The session begins on July 16 and continues through August 9.

For more information, call the recreation office at 474-5115.

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