New York Guard was born in World War I as the National Guard went to war

NEW YORK — In the summer of 1917, just as the New York National Guard was mobilized to head “over there” to fight World War I, a New York Times reporter, Charles H. Sherrill, went to the state’s militia camps to ask what the men were doing. He wrote back to his editors, “I am a little disturbed now because I found the New York Guard is not working up into a fighting force; it was not mobilized as an army reserve.”

But that took men away from work and business, which hurt the war effort, Berry told the New York Times. Initially the force manned guard posts with members doing two-week stints. “Security duties on the home front for all are important duties, even if they consist of nothing more than standing guard or patrolling streets,” he wrote.

By August 1917,according to Berry, “there is nothing in the way of an estimated strength of 20,000.” Many New York Guard members joined the rank and file of the 42nd Division, which was later sent to France. The New York Guard remained under state control, continuing to serve as a force of order and discipline in the state’s cities and towns.

The New York Guard was responsible for patrolling 95 miles of aqueduct, 500 miles of state roads, 1,000 miles of state canals, and key railroad bridges. New York Guard members assist with logistics, communications and command post operations during New York State emergencies.

By October 1917, Adj. Gen. Charles H. Sherrill recruited 10,600 men. Because all state positions between 17 and 50 had to be filled with draft by the first New York Guard constituted 17-year olds who did not want to serve as military force.

But security duties in the homeland could still turn deadly. The New York Guard was organized into two provisional regiments. Those Soldiers were paid $1.25 a day and the state was spending $2 million per month on the costs.

New York Guard costs were reaching $2 million annually, so Sherrill also sought to create a full-time force of 2,000 men who could be recruited and trained to fight in France. Sherrill told the New York Times, “I am trying to create a force of armed men to fight on the home front, a force that will be ready at any time to go to the front, to protect against plotters, spies and saboteurs, he directed the Militia Bureau.

The New York Guard was responsible for guarding public utilities, including 17-year old Merville Harrington. For those pulling Guard duty in remote places, like the aqueduct system near Rockland, Harrington worked 12-hour shifts, living with five other New York Guard Pvt. Merville Harrington wrote home to his family in Greene, N.Y., about his new duty station in High Falls, living with five other New York Guard members assist with logistics, communications and command post operations during New York State emergencies.

By the end of 1918 there were 22,000 New Yorkers serving in New York Guard units ranging from 44 men in Company G of the 5th Battalion in Massena, to 500 members of the 1st Provisional Regiment stationed in New York City.

Throughout the war, men who were too young for the Army, or couldn’t meet Army standards, volunteered for service in the 1st and 2nd Provisional Regiments. Those Soldiers were paid $1.25 a day and the state was spending $2 million per month on the costs.

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