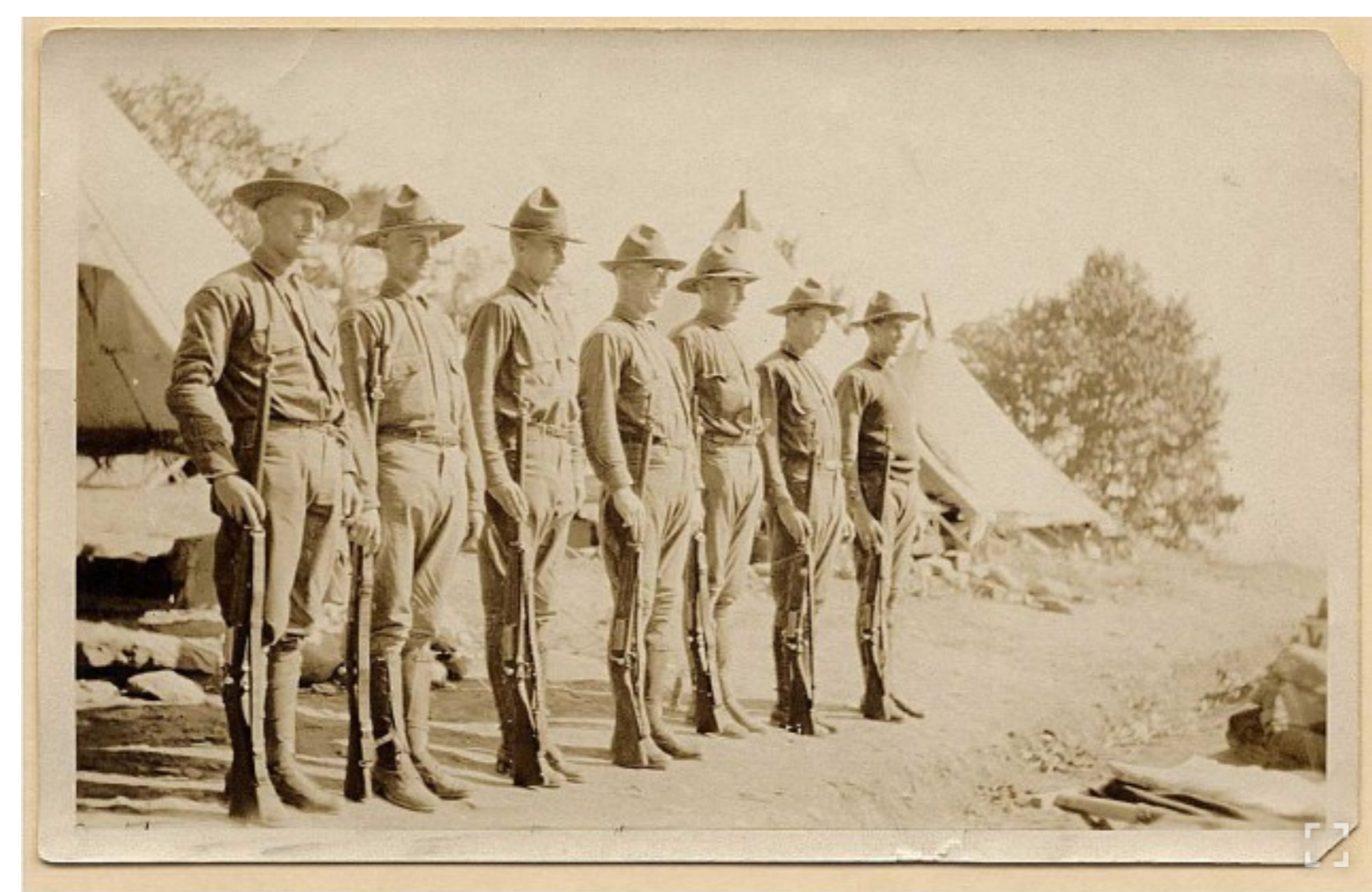




# New York Guard was born in World War I as the National Guard went to war

By Eric Durr | New York National Guard | April 25, 2017



NEW YORK - In the summer of 1917, as the New York National Guard mobilized to head "over there" to France to fight World War I, New York Gov. Charles S. Whiteman was looking for armed men to fight on the home front over here.

That need to replace National Guard Soldiers who had been protecting railroad bridges, water lines and canals resulted in the creation of the New York Guard, the state's volunteer self-defense force, on Aug. 3, 1917.

One hundred years later, the New York Guard is still part of New York's Military Forces, augmenting the National Guard with trained manpower. New York Guard members assist with logistics, communications and command post operations during New York State emergencies.

As the United States built up an Army to fight the Central Powers, the entire New York National Guard mobilized and was sent to training camps. The last National Guard troops still in state service were federalized on Aug. 5, 1917.

Prior to that, National Guard troops had been pulling guard duty on key infrastructure since February, 1917.

It wasn't just paranoia. German agents blew up a munitions depot on the New Jersey side of New York Harbor in 1916. One Guardsman on duty on a railroad bridge in Waterford, New York in April, 1917 reported being shot at.

To replace these National Guard troops, Congress authorized the states to utilize their ability to raise militias to serve as state troops.

According to Barry Stentiford, author of the book "America's Home Guard," the definitive work on state defense forces, New York's leaders had always been particularly concerned about needing a state military force.

Because New York was a heavily industrialized state, with large immigrant and poor populations, state officials always wanted a military force around to suppress riots or violent strikes, he writes.

So New York moved quickly to create a force of 10,000 men to replace the National Guard.

The first unit of the new State Guard was a cavalry troop made up of 40 polo players based in Garden City, Long Island, according to the New York Times on July 30, 1917.

By October 1917, Adj. Gen. Charles H. Sherrill recruited 10,600 men. Because all able-bodied men between 18 and 45 had to register for the draft, the New York Guard consisted of 17-year olds seeking some experience before they became eligible for the draft, and men over 45.

The New York Guard was responsible for patrolling 95 miles of aqueduct, 500 miles of state canals, and key railroad bridges.

Initially the force manned guard posts with members doing two-week stints. But that took men away from work and business, which hurt the war effort, Sherrill told the New York Times.

So Sherrill recruited a force of 2,000 men who did duty full time, divided into two provisional regiments. Those Soldiers were paid \$1.25 a day and the state was spending \$150,000 per month on the costs.

New York Guard costs were reaching \$2 million annually, so Sherrill also reached out to chambers of commerce around the state to ask businessmen to help him get the best deals on local goods and services to support the troops.

While the state guard units were primarily local forces, the federal government also looked to them as part of the nation's homeland defense. When Secretary of War Newton D. Baker called for a force of 100,000 men to protect against plotters, spies and saboteurs, he directed the Militia Bureau (now the National Guard Bureau) to work with the state guards to find men.

And Army Brig. Gen. Eli D. Hoyle, the commander of the Army's Eastern Department, praised New York Guard members for "quality and patriotic spirit" in performing their "important and onerous duties."

The New York Times also praised the New York Guard members.

"Protection of the aqueducts and bridges, armories and public buildings and effective co-operation with the Federal Government in its military preparations are essential," the Times wrote on Oct. 7, 1917.

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, while older men joined the part-time units.

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 1,065 in the 23rd Regiment in Brooklyn.

However, Adj. Gen. Charles W. Berry wrote in his annual report in 1919, no more than 5,000 troops could have been fielded. "At no time was the New York Guard properly armed, uniformed and equipped," he wrote.

For those pulling Guard duty in remote places, like the aqueduct system near New Paltz in Ulster County, the duty could be cold and boring but also fun.

In letters now held by the Haviland-Heldgerd Historical Collection, 17-year old New York Guard Pvt. Merville Harrington wrote home to his family in Greene, New York, about his new duty station in High Falls, living with five other Guard members in a little house near "Shaft 5" on the aqueduct and what great duty it was.

Photos preserved in the collection, taken by Sgt. Thomas Burke, show the men riding in a buddy's car and playing with their dogs.

But security duties in the homeland could still turn deadly.

Thirty-two members of the New York Guard based in the Hudson Valley died in the influenza epidemic that swept the United States and the world in 1918, including 17-year old Merville Harrington.

The New York Guard rendered valuable service in guarding public utilities, preserving order and in many other ways," Berry wrote in 1919. "Its members are entitled to the highest commendation for the patriotic manner in which they performed the important duties thrust upon them," he said.

## Related Links:

[National Guard World War I Centennial](#)

## RELATED STORIES

MAY 31, 2022  
**Army announces initiatives to improve quality of life for Soldiers in Alaska**

APRIL 12, 2022  
**U.S. Army STAND-TO! | Army Organic Industrial Base Modernization Implementation Plan**

MARCH 28, 2022  
**Local Vietnam veterans showcase personal objects from their service**

FEBRUARY 2, 2022  
**Department of the Army to initiate separation of COVID-19 vaccination order refusers**

DECEMBER 16, 2021  
**Active Army achieves 98 percent vaccination rate with less than one percent refusal rate**

DECEMBER 9, 2021  
**Department of the Army announces updated COVID-19 vaccination rates**

NOVEMBER 17, 2021  
**The U.S. Army releases a two volume book about Operation Enduring Freedom**

OCTOBER 13, 2020  
**National Museum of the United States Army to open Veterans Day 2020**

JANUARY 17, 2020  
**Army announces upcoming 10th Mountain Division Headquarters unit rotation**

DECEMBER 6, 2017  
**New Civilian Aides to the Secretary of the Army invested**

APRIL 22, 2016  
**Senior U.S. Army official celebrates Earth Day during kick-off for next steps of Everglades project**

JANUARY 8, 2016  
**DA ANNOUNCES ROTATIONAL DEPLOYMENTS**

