

[HISTORY]

A FIGHT NEARLY FORGOTTEN

America's post-World War I military deployment to Siberia could not have been more precarious – or more vital.

BY MIKE COPPOCK

Maj. Gen. William Graves was preparing to deploy to France during World War I when he received secret orders to meet Secretary of War Newton Baker at a Kansas City train station on Aug. 2, 1918.

There, Baker handed Graves secret orders from President Woodrow Wilson. The general was to lead 8,000 U.S. troops into Siberia immediately to secure war supplies on the docks of Vladivostok worth \$1 billion and prevent Germany from obtaining them. They would need to take control of the Trans-Siberia Railway and rescue the 40,000-strong Czech Legion fighting across Asia toward a Pacific port. Baker watched Graves read the orders, then added, "Watch your step – you will be walking on eggs loaded with dynamite."

Wilson sent U.S. military personnel into Russia to engage communist forces, the early harbinger of a Cold War decades away, to make sure Imperial Japan did not grab massive Siberia for its empire. On the Fourth of July 1918, he announced the plan to join Japanese forces there in an attempt to rescue the Czech Legion. It was a daunting mission in the harshest of conditions, a little-known chapter in U.S. military history that would result in the loss of 353 American soldiers.

Col. Henry Styer landed with an advance group from the 27th and 31st infantry divisions. Immediately, Styer sent the 27th with Japanese and White Russian units up the railway to pursue communists threatening the line. Both the Japanese and the White Russians stopped due to bitter cold temperatures, but U.S. troops chased the communists 1,000 miles in one month, capturing Khabarovsk. The communists were impressed. They referred to the Americans as the "Wolfhounds." Grudgingly, Japanese Gen. Otozo Yamada sent a thank-you note to the 27th's commander.

Graves informed Yamada that the United States was independent of Allied command, refusing to assist Japanese and Cossack soldiers in an offense against Russia. He had secured control of the rail line, allowing the Czech Legion to escape while they were fighting the Bolsheviks. German and Austrian POWs were surrendering by the thousands.

The mission's success came at a price. At Habarovski, a Cossack sniper killed a U.S. signal corpsman. An armed Cossack train opened up machine-gun fire on a freight car filled with sleeping U.S. soldiers. Fire-isolated American troops were killed at Novitskaya. And at 4 a.m. June 25, 1919, at Romanovka, communist partisans attacked an American unit as the soldiers slept. Twenty-six men were killed in the opening round. One soldier was reportedly hit 17 times.

The Cossacks took a U.S. captain and corporal hostage at Iman. Maj. Charles Shamotulski arrived with 150 men, demanding the hostages' return. A Japanese unit threatened to come to the Cossacks' aid, but Shamotulski refused to budge. They finally turned over the beaten men.

Communist victories over the Whites in 1919 forced Graves to order all U.S. forces to form a defensive perimeter around Vladivostok in December 1919. Wilson ordered U.S. forces out of Siberia in 1920, and Graves pulled out in April as the Japanese took one last jab at him, with their band striking up the tune "Hard Times Come Again No More."

Graves had rescued the Czech Legion, shipped the war supplies back to the United States, and frustrated Japanese hopes of consuming Siberia. It is a nearly-forgotten military success with monumental consequences, had it failed. If Siberia had fallen to Imperial Japan, Franklin Roosevelt's lend-lease aid to Stalin against Hitler would never have reached the Soviets. U.S. munitions would never have been able to cross through a Japanese Siberia.

Today there are no monuments nor memorials to the U.S. soldiers who fought it out in Russia during the rise of communism and Japanese imperialism. It is but a footnote in history, one of many precarious moments that changed the course of the century – a quiet U.S. deployment to Siberia well before the Cold War was officially on.

Mike Coppock is a writer who lives and works in both Oklahoma and in Alaska.



U.S. and Czech military officers in Siberia in 1918. Library of Congress

son, it is the lone officer on the mission who receives the Medal of Honor. The enlisted are given a lesser award.

— Jim Truemper, Merrill, Iowa

'The Shady Bunch'

The article titled "The Shady Bunch," (May, Rapid Fire) written by James V. Carroll, was great. Those girls are awesome. I'm sure there are many other wonderful children and parents in the world today, and it would be great if the media would at least give some of these good stories along with the bad.

— Edna Fisher, Lake Wales, Fla.

'A Fight Nearly Forgotten'

I found Mike Coppock's article, "A Fight Nearly Forgotten," (May) to be extremely interesting. However, there is one error. He states that there are no monuments or memorials to U.S. soldiers who fought in Russia.

The state of Michigan has a memorial, located in White Chapel Memorial Park Cemetery in Troy, Mich., that honors the men from Michigan who fought in northern Russia. The 339th Infantry Regiment with the 1st Battalion of the 310th Engineers and the 337th Ambulance and Hospital Companies arrived in Archangel, Russia, on Sept. 4, 1918.

About 75 percent of the 5,500 troops who made up the North Russian Expeditionary Force were from Michigan. They called themselves "Polar Bears." Ninety-four of them were killed in action. In 1929, five former "Polar Bears" of the 339th Infantry Regiment returned to

North Russia in an attempt to recover the bodies of fellow soldiers who had been killed in action or died of exposure 10 years earlier. They recovered 86 bodies. Fifty-six of these were buried around the memorial site on May 30, 1930.

— Skip Bushart, Waterford, Mich.

I served with the 1/31 Infantry of the 7th ID on the DMZ in Korea from 1968-69, and I found the article about the 31st and 27th Infantry Regiments intriguing. The 31st Infantry adopted a silver polar bear with the inscription PRO PATRIA as its insignia to commemorate its Siberian service. I wore this insignia proudly at the time, and presently the soldiers of the 4/31st Infantry of the 10th Mountain Division proudly wear it. I feel that the polar bear crest is an appropriate living memorial to these fine men who served this country in the extreme conditions of Siberia.

Elements of the 4/31st Infantry within the 10th Mountain saw service in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it's the only active battalion of the 31st Infantry on duty in the Army today.

— Gary A. Collier, Brooklyn, N.Y.

In his article, Mike Coppock misidentified the U.S. military units. The two Army units sent to Siberia in 1918 were not a "division," but rather the 27th Infantry Regiment (the "Wolfhounds") and the 31st Infantry Regiment (the "Polar Bears.")

— Jim Pitts, Jackson, Miss.

'Why Veterans Unite'

I thought you would be interested giving credit to the author of your boxed statement on page 54 of the May issue.

It comes from Michael Norman's book "These Good Men," a Vietnam memoir written 16 years after his return from combat. The book was an attempt to reunite with men of his former platoon, which led to a renewal of the bonds of comradeship. I cannot think of a better expression of why old comrades find each other's company so comforting and cathartic. It also helps me explain why, 40 years later, I still find that visits with my former company commander and lead scout are a special time of reflection and comfort.

— Tom Manson, Chesterfield, Va.

'Our Other Immigration Problem'

To demand identification from everyone who fits a profile would be to trample on the rights of those here legally, not to mention the fact that not all illegals are Hispanic; indeed, our experience with foreign terrorists who entered this country illegally would suggest otherwise. The first paragraph (June) acknowledges this dilemma but then avoids it.

— Dr. Merton L. Bland, Arlington, Va.

Correction: In a photo caption accompanying the article "The Safety Net" (June), an incorrect date was listed. The photo was taken between 1918 and 1920.

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