

Story Of The One Hundred Twenty-Sixth Regiment

By

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(Excerpt from the Kalamazoo County Honor Roll 1917 – 1919)

It was not until July 3rd, 1917, several months after the entrance of the United States into the World War, that the Proclamation of the President, calling into Federal Service the troops of Wisconsin and Michigan, was issued.

From April 6th till July 3rd, 1917, might properly be called the organization period. It was a foregone conclusion that the 126th, through the 32nd Michigan Infantry would be called upon for service. Colonel Westnedge, as Commanding Officer of the 32nd Michigan Infantry, was busy perfecting his regiment and that his work was well done is shown in the history of the Regiment. Indeed it made a splendid showing when finally gathered together at Grayling, Michigan, the training camp of the State, in mid-July.

At Grayling the recruits were given their first instruction and the period from arrival there until leaving for Camp MacArthur at Waco, Texas, was profitably spent in recruit instruction and in equipping the Regiment for the hard long hours of training which was to be its lot in sunny Texas. G. O. No. 101 War Department, 1917, organized the 32nd Division (old 12th) from the troops of Wisconsin and Michigan. At this time Wisconsin had six Regiments of Infantry (two organized after the beginning of the War) and Michigan had but three Regiments. The original plan was to form in the re-organization four Regiments of Infantry of which Wisconsin would have three and Michigan but one. General Covell, the Commanding General of the Michigan troops, and other Michigan officers objected so strongly to this that the outcome of it was the organization of two Brigades, one from each state. The 63rd Brigade consisting of the 125th and 126th Infantry was formed of Michigan troops with General Covell commanding.

The 126th Infantry, Colonel Joseph B. Westnedge, Commanding, was formed from the 32nd Michigan Infantry and a part of the 31st Michigan Infantry. The final reorganization was not completed until late in September, owing to the late arrival of the 33rd Michigan Infantry at Waco, due to their service at the Straits and Camp Custer, as a guard outfit. The period of training at Camp MacArthur until the middle of January was one continual round of hard work from early morning until late at night. It was a period, I think, when we first realized the possibilities of the human body and mind to withstand fatigue.

Late in December, 1917, inspectors from the War Department marked ahead the date of leaving for France, owing to the fine condition and splendid training of the Division. We were jumped over several Divisions that had been scheduled to leave ahead of us. The men of the Division were unanimous in giving the credit for this showing to the Commanding Generals and officers whose executive abilities made it possible.

In January the 126th left Camp MacArthur, knowing only that the final destination would be "over there." Upon arrival at the coast we found ourselves stationed at Camp Merritt, N. J. The two or

three weeks spent here were enjoyable ones. Only 40 miles from New York and no work except a daily hike to keep us in good physical condition.

On February 19th the S. S. President Grant left the shores of the United States with the 126th Infantry and other troops aboard, bound for Europe. The President Grant was one of a convoy guarded on the first part of the trip by a U. S. Cruiser. Later when the "danger zone" was reached several torpedo boats arrived to convoy us the remainder of the way. We had the usual sub scare and it's a certainty that few removed any clothes the last few nights at sea.

On March 4 we dropped anchor in the Harbour at Brest, France, and until that time very few knew our destination, and it was here on March 6 that the 126th Infantry first touched the soil of France. A soil that later they were to have a much better acquaintanceship with. A soil that all were glad to have a chance to sleep upon later without a protection or covering, and a soil in which several hundred were destined to sleep for the last time—among the latter our honored and loved Colonel.

The regiment upon disembarking immediately entrained in one of the French trains for St. Nazaire. Here it might be well to say that the jokes and stories of the French trains, of which we had heard so much, were so forcibly impressed upon us, that it is safe to say that upon arrival the next morning at St. Nazaire all considered the French railroad accommodations anything but a joke.

Our first real disappointment came to us at St. Nazaire. We had had our visions of soon being in battle and being real heroes. Instead we learned that the 32nd Division was not to be a combat organization but a replacement outfit. That the 126th Infantry, instead of following its brave Colonel into battle and gaining laurels for him and the Regiment, was doomed to stay right in St. Nazaire and for the time being at least act as stevedores, etc. We were told that later, perhaps upon arrival of more laboring troops from the U. S. we would be broken up as an organization and the officers and men re-assigned to combat divisions needing replacements. That gave some hope of getting into action, as individuals, but not any for the outfit of which we were so proud. It was or rather should have been a death blow to the spirits of the Regiment, but here its training came to the front. The Regiment lost none of its discipline or spirit, but instead tried to do its best, and that it did, is testified by the letters of commendation received by Colonel Westnedge from the commanding General of the Port and the Commanding Officers of the works under way there, testifying that the 126th Infantry was the best disciplined outfit with which they had had anything to do, that it did the most work of any organization which had ever worked at St. Nazaire. These letters are a matter of record in the files of the Regiment which were turned in to the War Department. The Regiment unloaded ships, loaded trains, worked in the warehouses, graded areas for R. R. yards, laid tracks and every other kind of hard labor that it was possible to find. The showing made here by the enlisted men was all to their credit and too much praise cannot be given them for the noble way in which they performed every task to which they were set.

After about six weeks of this work the most pleasant news that it was possible to receive at that time came over the wires. It stated that General Haan had succeeded in his efforts to have the Division fated as a combat organization and that we would leave immediately for the 10th Training Area with Regiment Headquarters at Champlitte. Within 60 hours the Regiment was entrained and on its way. Now at last we were to have the chance to show what we could do. For weeks we had been reading of the Spring Drive of the Germans and we felt that it would not be long before we would have a part in trying to stop their determined onslaught. This, after the menial work we had been doing, was a most gratifying hope.

For four weeks at and in the vicinity of Champlitte the Regiment trained intensively. For this purpose we had French officers and officers of the 1st and 2nd Divisions attached to us to teach the new things which had come up since our training in the States.

Early in May our training was completed and all that was necessary was a little trench experience. For this purpose the Belfort Sector was selected and May 18th found us in the trenches of Alsace, the first troops on German soil. This Sector had long been considered "quiet" by the French. They pretended to do no fighting and the two lines merely watched one another. Shortly after our taking over this Sector things began to brighten up a bit, due to the efforts on our part. We pulled off a few raids and always had a few scouting parties out. The 126th here lost several men from enemy fire and holds the distinction of losing the first man on German soil.

The very day the 3rd Division first stopped the enemy at the Marne, July 18, was the day the 126th completed its tour of trench duty and was relieved so that it might be used in the real fighting to the north.

After train rides, hikes, and a trip by cannon the Regiment on July 28 found itself directly in the rear of the line north of the Marne, and on July 30th relieved elements of the 109th and 110th Infantries in the vicinity of Courmont. On the 31st an advance was made to straighten the line and on August 1st the Regiment attacked the heights across the Ourcq River. These heights were taken at considerable loss, but the enemy was kept on the move until he had been forced back 19 kilometers and taken a stand on the heights to the north of the Vesle. The enemy had all the best of position and inflicted severe losses. During this action of eight days the Division was opposed by three German Divisions, including one of the crack Prussian Guards. Our burial squads buried more dead Germans than the total of the 32nd killed and missing.

I have not the figures of the losses of the 126th Infantry at hand, but I do have the casualties of the Division. The four infantry regiments suffered practically all of these losses, as follows: Killed, 27 officers and 645 men; severely wounded, 58 officers and 1,079 men; slightly wounded, 82 officers and 91 men; gassed, 21 officers and 597 men; missing, 46 men; died of wounds, 12 officers, and 83 men; a total loss from all causes, 3,547.

The 1st Battalion, the last unit of the regiment to be relieved, was relieved by units of the 28th Infantry Division on the night of August 7-8 and the Regiment withdrew to about 10 kilometers from the lines for a rest. Heiney had too many planes, which were forever trying to get us with bombs. But

then one had a chance to eat a bit, which had nearly become a lost habit in the ten days of chasing the Hun.

After two weeks of this so-called rest, if such a thing were possible on a battle field, we were ordered to entrain in cannons for a ride to another front, and on August 28th entered the front line northeast of Soissons as a part of General Mangin's 10th Army. The 126th, after an all night hike, took its position at 5 o'clock a. m., relieving a Regiment of "Blue Devils." It might be well to state that the Division of French "Blue Devils" relieved by the 32nd had tried in three attempts to advance, but the Hun had actually forced them back until the sector relieved by the 32nd Division was in the shape of a bow or semi-circle back into the allied line. The 126th position was in the center of this bow and after the all night hike the regiment went over in the morning at 7 o'clock and straightened out that bow without the help of artillery. It was a daring piece of work and was admirably executed.

The advance continued and when relieved by the 2nd Moroccan Division on September 2, the 32nd Division had advanced to a depth of 5⁴ kilometers and captured the town of Juvigny. It was here the Division won its name of "Les Terribles." During this action of five days the Division suffered the following losses:

Killed, 15 officers and 335 men; severely wounded, 20 officers and 616 men; slightly wounded, 52 officers and 1,246 men; gassed, 9 officers and 565 men; missing, 34 men; died of wounds, 6 officers and 106 men; total losses from all causes of 2,848.

In capturing the strong German positions on the Juvigny plateau, the 32nd Division contributed to an important extent to the success of the French in outflanking the German line on the Chemin les Dames.

After the relief from the line here the Regiment was ordered back for a rest, and the days from September 10 to September 20 were spent at Joinville, France, out of the battle area. This was the only real rest the Regiment received from May to November; the balance of the time it was under fire. On September 20 the Regiment enbussed at Joinville for the Argonne-Meuse front. After being carried as far as trucks could go and then hiking, the Regiment entered the front line on September 30 before the Kriemhilde Stellung near Romagne-sons-Montfancon.

In a series of desperate attacks during the next three weeks the Division succeeded in completely breaking the German line and penetrating the enemy position to a depth of 5^{J/2} kilometers. For 20 consecutive days the Division remained in the front line, continually fighting, and the 126th during all of this time was either in the front or support lines. It is a record for endurance that can be equaled by very few outfits.

The key' point to the whole Kriemhilde Stellung was the Cote' Dann Marie, which hill was directly to the front of the sector occupied by the 126th. Officers and men from this regiment in a daring daylight attack succeeded in taking this formidable position, and it was then the Division, headed by the 126th, first penetrated this strongly fortified line of resistance.

During these 20 consecutive days of fighting the Division was opposed by 11 German Divisions, including the 5th Prussian Guards, the 3rd Prussian Guards, and the 28th Division, known as the "Kaiser's Own." During this long period in the line the sector on our right was occupied by the 79th, 3rd and 5th U. S. Divisions and the sector on our left by the 91st, 1st and 42nd Divisions. The 32nd Division losses during this action were as follows:

Killed, 39 officers and 860 men; severely wounded, 32 officers and 1,176 men; slightly wounded, 83 officers and 2,784 men; gassed, 17 officers and 53 men; missing, 9 officers and 140 men; died of wounds, 10. officers and 200 men; total loss from all causes, 5,950.

The Regiment was moved back to the Bois de Montfancon on October 21 for a period in which to reorganize and rest up. The woods at this time was a sea of mud and under shell fire from the east of the Nuse. It is doubtful if anyone received any rest, but owing to a lack of troops it was not possible to move us back to a real rest area. About the 1st of November we again moved up and took a reserve position near Aincreville. It was here on November 7 that Colonel Westledge left us to go to the hospital. For several days the doctor and other officers had been urging him to go back but he had steadily refused. He had tonsillitis, which developed into quinsy, and at last he was made to see that he was in a serious condition. This was the last sight any of us at headquarters had of our beloved Colonel and it was some six weeks after his death before we learned of it.

On the afternoon of the same day on which the Colonel left us, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Meyer, the Regiment crossed the Meuse River at Dun-sur-Meuse and entered the Dun-sur-Meuse bridgehead, where we were in support position on November 11 when the Armistice was signed.

The total Division losses during this period of five days, from all causes, was 687 men.

During our eight months in France we had spent six months under fire with but 10 days in a rest area. The Regiment had fought on five fronts, in three major offensives—Aisne-Marne, Oise-Aisne, and Meuse-Argonne. The Division had losses of 14,000 men killed, wounded and missing in action; had captured 2,000 rifles, 200 machine guns, 100 pieces of artillery, and thousands of rounds of ammunition of all kinds; had gained 380 kilometers in four attacks and repulsed without loss of ground, every counter attack of the enemy; were the first American troops to set foot on German soil in Alsace; captured Fismes in Aisne-Marne offensive; fought as the only American unit in General Mangin's famous 10th French Army in Oise-Aisne offensive; twice in the line of Argonne-Meuse offensive, fighting continuously for 20 days and penetrating the Kreimhilde Stellung; in action when the Armistice was signed. On November 17, as a part of the 3rd Army, the Division started its march to Germany. After crossing the Sauer River into German territory on December 1, 1918.

On December 13 the Division crossed the Rhine River after marching 300 kilometers in winter weather. It was a hike such as would try the strongest heart. It is an actual fact that it was sheer

American grit that carried the average soldier through it. Many a man tramped along with his bare feet leaving blood-stains on the snow. The Army did all in its power to keep up with supplies, but at times it simply could not be done.

The 126th Infantry entered the front line of the Coblenz bridge-head and held it until relieved by the 125th Infantry, which Regiment held it until the Division was relieved to return to the States.

The troops of the Division held the center sector between the 1st Division on the right and the 2nd Division on the left.

It is significant that the 32nd was the only former National Guard Division to cross the Rhine, and it was an honor which the Regiment fully appreciated.

Upon leaving the bridge-head and arriving in Brest early in April, 1919, the Regiment was practically broken up. Many officers and men elected to stay in France, and such as did remain with the organization did not come home with it.

It was early in June before the last arrivals in the States were mustered out of service.

Such is the brief history of the 126th Infantry. To write a complete and detailed history would take months and could not be done without the aid of material which was prepared for that purpose during our stay in Germany. Both the history of the Division and the Regiment are being prepared for publication.