

## The First Provisional Regiment

The United States entered World War I on April 6, 1917, almost three years after the fighting began. The New York National Guard began the task of guarding the New York City water supply, including the Catskill Aqueduct through Ulster County in February 1917. The fear of terrorism predicated that this vital resource

be protected from potential acts of sabotage, as German sympathizers had already blown up a munitions plant in Jersey City, New Jersey on July 30, 1916. Known as the 'Black Tom Explosion', seven people were killed, hundreds injured, and the blast felt as far away as Philadelphia.

The Tenth New York Infantry of the Guard was ordered to protect the Catskill division of the Aqueduct and its headquarters was soon established in New Paltz, NY. Control of the guard line was maintained continuously until the regiment was relieved in August 1917. The first soldiers arrived in New Paltz in February 1917. Transporting supplies of various kinds was a big problem as all of the roads were drifted deep with snow and the men were obliged to cover distances of two or three miles to get to and from their duty posts. During the month of February, the weather was unusually cold, and one entire week the thermometer registered between zero and 22 degrees below zero, with a biting northwest wind blowing constantly.

On February 13, 1917, the infantry suffered a terrible loss when Private Hugh Taylor of Company C was killed by the accidental discharge of a gun in the hands of a member of his own company. The incident occurred three miles south of the Bonticou Tunnel while Taylor was on duty.

At first, the Tenth New York Guard was encamped right in the heart of the village of New Paltz, on the corner of Main St. and North Chestnut Street, where the United States Post Office stands today. In May 1917, a much more suitable camp was established along the banks of the Wallkill River on the site of the old Normal School. The soldiers stationed in the village were either a part of the Regimental Headquarters Company, the Supply Company or a hospital detachment. A regimental hospital was located in a residence near the encampment. One of the notable features of the Regiment's tour at New Paltz was the organization and development of a band. A number of young men from Ulster County were recruited by the adjutant and added to the force by the Bandmaster, Lt. Herman Silverstein. This band became famed as the best in the Army of Occupation.

On August 5, 1917, the New York National Guard was federalized to be sent overseas. State law mandated that a militia be in place to protect the state, citizens and resources and therefore the New York Guard came into being on August 3, 1917. The NY Guard took over the watch on the Aqueduct from the departing National Guard.



Haviland-Heidgerd Historical Collection

The men of the First Provisional Regiment first billeted in tents at the end of Pine Road and later built themselves barracks, a mess hall and officer's quarters at the intersection of the water supply's tunnel and Mountain Rest Road, to the west of the village of New Paltz. This site was called "Camp Fort Orange".

Sergeant Thomas R. Burke was part of Troop B, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry stationed at Camp Ft. Orange. (A complete list of the soldiers serving in this Troop is found at the conclusion of this introduction.) Burke had brought a camera with him and took photographs of his friends, fellow soldiers, and the animals that lived and worked with them, including their beloved cavalry horse, Peggy. The photos he shot are a rare, unique and singular glimpse into the past. Few pictures exist of the New York Guard during World War I, let alone the First Provisional Regiment. It is no exaggeration to say that Sergeant 'Tommy' Burke's wonderful, candid photos are a precious addition to New York State's History. These photographs were donated to the Haviland-Heidgerd Historical Collection, by his widow, Helena Burke. Sadly, no signs of "Camp Fort Orange" exist today, but since the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 attacks on NYC, the aqueduct has again been guarded against acts of terrorism.

The First Provisional Regiment guarded the 97 miles of the Croton and Catskill Aqueducts, with camps and posts from Hillview, on the New York City border, all the way up to the Ashokan Reservoir. They were men who were otherwise not eligible for active service and boys who, at 17, were too young. They were married, they were single; not a few hailed from wealthy families, others came from humble means. Some of the youngest soldiers had never been away from home before, and plenty of men had never in their life traveled more than 20 miles from where they were born. In a 1919 report from the Adjutant General, Charles W. Berry, 'at no time was the New York Guard properly armed, uniformed, or equipped'. Guard duty was crushingly dull, and at other times, with strange noises and shadows issuing through dark nights, completely unnerving. One of the soldiers served was Merville Harrington. Merville wanted to do his bit for his country. Only 17 years old, he was too young to join the United States Army, so on May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1918, he enlisted with Company H, 4th Infantry New York Guard. When volunteers from within the New York Guard were needed to take over guarding the Aqueduct from the New York National Guard, Private Harrington signed on. He maintained a faithful and steady correspondence with his mother and siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins, and grandmother. Reading these letters one is struck by the fact that, though a soldier, and doing a man's job, Private Harrington was still a teenage boy. He unashamedly expresses his homesickness, yet also clearly delights in his life's new adventure. The reader shares in his pride at being promoted to Private First Class. He is proud not only that he's moved up in rank, but that the promotion comes also with a pay raise, allowing him to send a little more money home. We discover that he has adopted one of the puppies born to the New York Guard Airedale Patrol. Private Harrington's joy in learning that his mother will allow him to bring the puppy home when his enlistment is over, is absolutely crushing in its' poignancy, for this is the soldier's last letter home. He died of the Spanish influenza a week later. Private First Class Harrington was as much a casualty of the Great War as if he's fought and died on the battlefields of France.

As his nephew, Byron Merville Harrington explains, 'My father – Merville's younger brother – was only four years old when his father died. He revered his older brother, and missed him very much until the day he died. I regret not ever knowing my uncle'. Now the owner of these letters, Byron Harrington has gladly given his permission to share these lively, funny and moving letters with the public.

When the influenza pandemic of 1918 spread to the United States, thirty seven New York Guard soldiers died. Yet amidst it all, the men faithfully performed their duty and maintained the line. They were all volunteers, and the work they'd done was crucial for the process of the war. A monument to these men, made with a stone from the Bonticou Crag, is located in the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. The above mentioned Private Harrington was one of the volunteers who brought the Memorial boulder from Bonticou Crag to Sleepy Hollow. His name is one of many found engraved on the stone.

**The First Provisional Regiment of the New York Guard began their withdrawal following the Armistice of November 11, 1918. There were no public accolades, nor were they awarded any medals. No song as rousing or world famous as 'Over There' had been written with them in mind, so during their service, they had penned tunes for themselves. There were no homecoming parades...indeed, they *were* home...and they and their stories are all but forgotten.**



**The following is a list of soldiers who served in Company B:**

First-Lieut. Frank M. VanNouhuys

Second-Lieut. Edgar B. Clark

First-Sergt.-John J. Burke

Supply-Sergt.-Chas. E. Kelly

Mess-Serg. Harold E. Parkman

### **Sergeants**

Thomas R. Burke

John J. Connors

Frank A. McCullough

Emerson C. Gray

John O'C Fish

Frank E. Hills

### **Corporals**

Thomas A. O'Malley

Garret R. Forster

Eugene J. Malone

Robert B. Convery

John R. McCormack

Charles T. Terry

Frederic E. Gillen

Douglas S. Williams

Chester J. Atkinson

Felix Cantamessner

### **Privates**

John W. Alberts

John W. Brasure

John S. Bantham

Frederick L. Bennet

James H. Clancy

Harry F. Campbell

J. Fred Clarke

Henry G. Cowan

John Cregan

William H. Cameron

Hildrith P. Drew

Clarence D. Forest

Charles E. Davenpeck

John D. Earll

Charles Effler  
Donald R. Ferris  
John V. Fischer  
Ambrose G. Gleason  
James J. Gallagher  
Charles H. Humer  
Joseph M. Hughes  
Ralph L Happel  
Edgar Jacobs  
Arthur S. Lewis  
Willard B. Lewis  
Howard F. Lewis  
Algernon S. Laelor  
William J. Mahar  
Thomas McCarthy  
Dayton B. Mochirie  
John E. Marshall  
Albert Notovagi  
John J. O'Reilly  
Michael J. O'Henry  
Miles Paley  
John J. Patterson  
Kenneth F. Rossman  
Willard G. Ruff  
Erwin J. Sanders  
Walter K. Scim  
William K. Spatz  
Tremaine A. Thayer

Peter C. Todd

Frank J. Taafe

Milton J. Van Bergen

Arnold G. Van Laer

Lewis N. Van Alstyne

Harold R. White

James J. Wagner

Adrean E. Young

Raymond D. Zeilman

Elmer G. Wallace