

War Dogs of the First Provisional Regiment

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It was August 1917 and Colonel John B. Rose had just completed his second inspection tour of the 98 mile long Aqueduct line He was worried.

The First Provisional Regiment was about as well-equipped and uniformed as they would ever be, which was a lot better than when they were initially mobilized. The New York National Guard had been provisioned, but took just about everything with them. Not having a penny allotted them from the state budget, the New York Guard were bundled with cast-offs and creaky bits and pieces found moldering in Armory storerooms around the state. Many a pair of boots looked suspiciously like Civil War issue...probably were...and even they were in short supply. What worried Col. Rose was no longer uniforms and equipment; it was the North end of the line itself.

Compared to the southern and mid-line of the Aqueduct, the Olive Bridge-Atwood section was almost desolation itself. The men patrolled in relative isolation...if a crisis arose, despite the recent addition of a phone-box, they were miles from help. Thick forest, hugging mountains and hills, threw deep shadows even during the day. It was rumored that in the surrounding area were tag teams of German sympathizers. What was a certainty, though, was that black bear and an occasional mountain lion prowled the woods; copperhead and rattlesnakes curled amongst the rocks...it was their territory, and the men of the line were interlopers.

Colonel Rose intuited that his men's greatest enemies up here were isolation, loneliness, and fear. He grasped a solution, though it involved the outlay of money, which, of course, they didn't have and wouldn't get...he wanted dogs. And the dogs he wanted were Airedales. Until recently the largest of the terriers, the fearless and energetic Airedale was one of the dog breeds currently ranging the battlefields of France and Belgium with Allied soldiers, and doing remarkable service. In this decision, Colonel John B. Rose of the New York Guard was tactically ahead of the U.S. Army by decades, for other than a team of sled dogs stationed in Alaska, the U.S. Army remarkably ignored over three thousand years of military history, and saw no need or use for dogs in war. The English, Belgians, Italians, Russians and French *did*, however. The English and French alone had a combined total of over 35,000 dogs, extremely well trained and serving as Red Cross dogs, messengers, draft animals and sentries. (Even troops of tough little Jack Russell terriers were recruited for the job of killing the rats that infested the trenches). The U.S. Army was eventually aware of what the Allied dogs were accomplishing and realized the enormous miscalculation it had made. With no canine training school in place, and no time to be lost, America had to rely on the English and French to supply them with any dogs that could be spared.

Colonel Rose understood that Utica was renowned for kennels of first-rate Airedales, breeding champions in the field and show-ring, and many local residents owned these big terriers. Perhaps not so coincidentally, Utica also happened to be the Adjutant General Lewis W. Stotesbury's home. After a cordial phone call by the Adjutant, Utica's Mayor

James Smith snapped to work. On 15 August, 1917, five young dogs were on their way to their training camp at Atwood...Airedales Rags, Betsy, Patsy, Help, and half-Airedale Brownie. More would arrive shortly from downstate, also patriotically donated by their owners to serve as canine soldiers in the New York Guard.

Though New York State's needs were different than those of the Allies slogging it out in No-Man's land overseas, the plan was still pure and simple militarily...the dogs were to be trained to patrol the Aqueduct line, guard post houses, and search for 'suspicious objects'...i.e., bombs...that might be hidden in the culverts. (The Black Tom munitions explosion in Jersey City the year before was still very fresh in everyone's memory.) A neat line of snug and sturdy dog houses were built, each with a tie out chain, and the dogs' training and care was entirely in the hands of "dog" Sgt. William Rivers, Co. A, 1st Infantry, in civilian life a trainer of Airedales. The men were told they could be friendly to these animals, but were forbidden to play with them, feed them, or become too attached to them, on the other hand visitors and soldiers in civilian dress were often encouraged to aggravate the dogs. The mandate was clear; the Airedales were not (any longer, at least) pets, nor were they mascots. They were there to work. The dogs were brought onto the line at night, where their acute senses obviated the disadvantages the men faced. They 'learned' their surroundings, the cut and cover brush and culverts, and knew the soldiers, alerting to any noise or movement that was suspicious. A 'No Trespass' warning was issued for the length of the Aqueduct. A few hapless civilians, wandering through the woods at night, and too close to the line, were cornered, and in one case attacked by the Airedale, Help. (Only the man's coat sleeve was ripped to shreds; the dog was pulled off in time). The reputation of the dog patrol spread like wildfire, and from then on, no one dared cross near the Aqueduct after sunset. The dogs were even lent out to other points on the line where trouble was suspected.

The dauntless Airedales of the New York Guard captured the imagination of the public; however...there were *other* dogs. In fact, there were almost 300 of them, from Atwood, all the way down to Dunwoodie, at camps, posts, and outposts. There were mongrels, and there were purebreds; dogs of every size and stripe. A lot of them were inherited...they appeared back when the New York National Guard manned the line, and when the soldiers departed for Europe, the dogs remained. Other dogs showed up when the New York Guard reported for duty, drawn to the various camps by the sounds of people, and the good, irresistible fragrance of cooked meals. Most of the dogs truly were strays looking for a meal and a home; others visited for the day, trotting back to their own homes at night, only to return back to their new friends at camp each morning. It is doubtful that these dogs went through any of the training of Airedale brigade; *maybe* they did in a very basic way...but it probably didn't matter much to the soldiers. At night...especially those that fell starless and bible-black... the watch on the Aqueduct was helped tremendously by the presence of the dogs. Even a mutt didn't need formal training to do what came naturally...they growled and barked at strange noises, and bounded fearlessly through the brush when something moved, driven to protect 'their' soldiers. But most of all, they were friends; a true companion who shared the scraps from supper and the dreary monotony of a long night's patrol. They also gave courage to the men...an abundance of whom were still in their teens, and had never even been away

from home before. The men loved these dogs, and the dogs loved them back, responding with the warmth of unconditional canine devotion.



**Pvt. Lewis Van Alstyne (left) with Viola, and friends - Troop B, 1st Cavalry, New Paltz'.
(Courtesy of Heidgerd-Haviland Collection, Elting Library, New Paltz.)**

How cherished these animals were, is evidenced in surviving photographs of the First Provisional Regiment. There are a couple dozen with dogs in them, and that the men *wanted* the dogs in the pictures, is proof enough of the esteem they had for them. Of the four photographs in which Pvt. Lewis Van Alstyne (Troop B, 1st Cavalry, New Paltz) appears, in three of them was his pit-bull mix, Viola. And despite the admonition to maintain a formal distance with the Airedales, those pictures, too, tell the real story...the men face the camera with a slight stiffness and formality, but there isn't an Airedale that isn't being held or hugged. 20 purebred Airedale puppies were born at Atwood, and in one photograph a tiny pup, eyes not yet open, is gently cradled in a soldier's hands, like a precious jewel.



"Storm King," one of the first line-bred Airedale patrol dogs.

The line guarding the Aqueduct began depopulating in the months after the Armistice was signed, on 11 November 1918. There came a very happy ending for Brownie, Patsy, Betsy, Help, Tongore Girl, Storm King, Dick, Tipperary, Viola, Rocket, Shokan, Atwood Bess, Rags, and all the dogs of the First Provisional Regiment. The Airedale Brigade was disbanded, and instantly, requests poured in to own the dogs. As other posts were pulled

off the Aqueduct, those dogs left, as well...they went away with the men, to spend the rest of their lives in a real home, adopted as a cherished pet, and as a member of a family, proud to own them.

The New York Guard dogs fared far better than their brethren overseas...after surviving gun shot wounds, injuries from shell fragments, and being gassed, having done brave service that saved an estimate of *thousands* of Allied lives, and despite the emotional protests of soldiers and civilians alike, who wanted to adopt them...the dogs that lived and fought with the Allies in Europe in World War I were destroyed.