



CITIZEN SOLDIERS

The 27th Division was a New York National Guard unit trained in Alabama, mobilized to California, and sent to the Pacific at the start of World War II. Yet they never forgot their roots as “New York’s Own.”

In the autumn of 1939, as central Europe fell under the rapid advance of Hitler’s armies, U.S. military officials began to focus on the declining effectiveness of America’s peacetime National Guard force. New York’s primary National Guard unit, the 27th Division, had only about half of its authorized 22,000 men. It was clear that the ranks of the National Guard’s “citizen soldiers” needed to be filled quickly.

For twenty years, the 27th Division had attended summer training at Camp Smith in Peekskill. But the mid-August 1940 camp was a massive exercise of more than 100,000 regular Army and National Guard units from New York and surrounding states organized at DeKalb Junction in northern New York. On August 23, President Franklin D. Roosevelt reviewed the troops, and on September 16 he signed the Selective Service and Training Act, the first peacetime conscription act in United States history.

The Selective Service Act required all men aged twenty-one to thirty-five to

World War I veteran John L. Fisk (in white shirt and suspenders) earned a Bronze Star for his command of the 165th Infantry's attack at Makin Atoll in World War II.

register and, if selected, serve for a period of one year, followed by service in one of the reserve forces (inactive National Guard) for either ten years or until age forty-five. The measure was intended to expand the National Guard force—a goal largely met through the addition of some sixteen million men nationwide who registered pursuant to the

and veterans of the 27th would remember conditions there as just about that vintage.

As they departed, many men seemed excited at the prospect of leaving home. Private Arthur Anderson from Staten Island told a reporter, "I think I'm going to enjoy it very much—it will be something like a vacation...My mother and father figure it

ranks, the scene brought back a flood of memories, and at least one commented that the soldiers in civilian clothing at the station, who had been mobilized too quickly to get their uniforms fitted, reminded him of his own hasty departure for the front in 1917.

Transport by rail began on October 23, 1940 from hub locations all over New York.

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New York's SOLDIERS

BY WILLIAM F. HOWARD

law. But few of the registrants paid attention to the fact that under the circumstances of a national emergency, the president could extend the period of service indefinitely.

Active Duty Begins

In late September, mobilization orders brought the 27th Division into active duty for an anticipated full year. Reorganized under a new commander, Major General William N. Haskell, an officer well beyond retirement age who had served with the Division since World War I, the 27th's new home was in Alabama at Fort McClellan, an old World War I training facility near Anniston, a small city east of Birmingham. The fort was named after the Union Civil War commander General George B. McClellan,

will do me a lot of good."

Private John Pulford said that he felt "pretty good about going," and that while he was "leaving a number of friends behind...[he] intended to have a lot of fun in Alabama."

Hundreds showed up at the train stations to see the soldiers off. The newspapers wrote that many laughed and joked, but others "broke down and cried" when the train departed. "One Brooklyn woman," a newspaper reported, "the mother of a Guardsman, collapsed when she saw the train move on. 'Don't take it that way,' a man told the crying woman. 'He's only going for a year's training and he's coming back. The country's not at war, you know.'" For many of the Great War veterans in the

While the officers were billeted in Pullman cars, the enlisted men were jammed into standard rail cars with no bunks and little opportunity for rest as the noisy train headed south. Upon their arrival at Anniston, the men, who had left the north in heavy winter uniforms, were forced to march about a mile in full gear to reach Fort McClellan.

The fort itself showed few signs of preparation for their arrival, offering straw mattresses and the billeting of six to eight men per tent, which were heated with Civil War-era Sibley stoves. Latrine facilities consisted of fifty-gallon drums positioned throughout the camp. The equipment issued was mostly of Great War vintage; there were only enough of the new M1 Garand rifles

The shoulder patch for the 27th Division features a stylized “NY” in the center and five stars representing the Orion constellation—a play on the name of the Division’s World War I commander John Francis O’Ryan.

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for one regiment, so the various units passed the weapons from regiment to regiment to give each soldier a chance at training. Captain Edmund Love, the 27th’s official historian, referred to this time as the “days of make-believe tanks and stovepipe mortars.”

Conditions improved toward the end of December, when the Division moved into new facilities built within the fort’s interior. An influx of new recruits early in 1941 swelled the ranks, mustered from all

2nd Armored Division, in combat maneuvers to improve tactical operations and coordination between regular Army and Guard components. Conducted in Tennessee in May and June, these operations lasted six weeks and marked the Army’s first attempts to integrate the National Guard into its regular Army operations. The success of the exercises helped pave the way for more comprehensive maneuvers that were planned for the fall of 1941—the largest peace-

In 1940, Private V.A. Pridler headed to Fort McClellan, Alabama to train at a run-down military outpost with an insufficient quantity of rifles, straw mattresses for bedding, and Civil War-era stoves and latrines.

challenges that had confronted their predecessors, who had trudged these same paths with the Union Army during the Civil War nearly eighty years before, now challenged the New Yorkers of the 27th Division. The hot, humid climate made marching in heavy winter-issue uniforms difficult, while rattlesnakes and a variety of stinging insects added further distraction.

The most important combat phase of the maneuvers, designed to test the Army’s

In February, 1942 the 27th began the longest wartime overseas deployment of any National



The “Fighting 69th” of the 27th Division at Camp Smith in Peekskill, 1939.

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over New York State under the terms of the Selective Service Act. These newcomers expected to serve just one year of active duty before discharge to a reserve unit.

Practicing for War

After six months of hard training, the bulk of the Division joined the 5th and 30th Army Divisions, along with Brigadier General George S. Patton’s

time maneuvers ever organized by the United States Army.

The 27th Division returned to Fort McClellan in mid-July. On July 21, Congress expanded the Selective Service Act, requiring that the service of one-year inductees be extended for an additional six months. The action, made at the request of President Roosevelt, convinced the soldiers that if war were declared, they might never go home.

More than 400,000 men participated in the Louisiana Maneuvers, which began on July 29 with the Red Army (a force composed of various units, including the 27th Division) marching from Fort McClellan to Birmingham and southwest to the Mississippi River. The column then moved west to Arkansas, where it encamped on August 10 and prepared to meet the Blue Army force under General Walter Krueger. The same

command structure, took place from September 15–30 in Louisiana, and included mock battles fought at Red River and Shreveport. The entire exercise was praised by both soldiers and officers. Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall declared the operation “a great success,” while Colonel Dwight D. Eisenhower (who served as chief of staff of the Red Army) said that “the maneuvers were necessary and fulfilled a great need.” After the war, unit historian Captain Edmund Love recalled: “No man who came through them belittled them later, even after going through combat. One soldier, in the midst of the battle for Saipan, said that ‘If it wasn’t for the shootin’ I’d say the Louisiana–Arkansas Maneuvers were as tough as this.’”



Guard division during World War II.

The 27th Is Ready

The mission had been such a success that news that the War Department was releasing nearly 200,000 soldiers from active duty because of hardship was greeted with surprise. The October 8 order released about 3,000 men in the 27th Division, devastating its strength. Command was also reassigned to a new, younger leader, Brigadier General Ralph MCT. Pennell, a regular Army officer and West Point graduate. At the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the Division consisted of only 920 officers and 13,334 enlisted men, a number 8,000 below its authorized strength. Yet it was probably the best-trained National Guard unit in the country—a fact not lost on the military planners in Washington.

The 27th was immediately mobilized. In a scenario that

would be repeated by the unit's descendants sixty years later in the wake of the World Trade Center attack, the men were ordered to protect railroads, dams, bridges, and critical power facilities from Alabama to Florida. On December 14, just seven days after Pearl Harbor, the 27th was ordered to California to guard the U.S. Pacific coast. Seventy-two trains were required to move the Division and its equipment 2,500 miles to its new home at Ontario, near Los Angeles.

The unit was brought up to fighting strength in late December with the addition of nearly 8,000 enlisted men and 200 officers. This infusion of recruits broadened the unit's geographic diversity. Soldiers from Staten Island and Albany now served with men from Idaho and Wyoming. But each wore the distinctive shoulder insignia of the New York 27th

Into the Cauldron

Allied military planners believed that the capture of Saipan was essential to achieving victory over Japan. The main invasion of the island, the first combined Army and Marine Corps operation of World War II, began on June 15, 1944. After weeks of ferocious fighting, American forces pressed the Japanese against the sea. Just before daybreak on the morning of July 7, the last remaining Japanese soldiers on Saipan staged a banzai charge into the lines of the 105th Infantry Regiment of the 27th Division. The defense organized by the regiment is still regarded as one of the great defensive fights in American military history.

Lieutenant Colonel William O'Brien of Troy, New York saw the 3,000 enemy infantry approaching and rallied his troops. Armed with only his revolver, he fired into the charge. When his ammunition ran out, he took over a machine gun whose gunner had been killed and fought valiantly until mortally wounded. Farther down the line, Sergeant Thomas Baker, also of Troy, emptied his revolver into the enemy ranks. After the battle, Baker was found with eight Japanese bodies beside his own.

Captain Ben Salomon, a Los Angeles dentist, was tending to the wounded when he was overrun. He fought hard to defend his comrades, but soon realized that he could not hold his position. Ordering his medics to evacuate the wounded, Salomon remained behind to hold off the enemy and protect the withdrawal. When last seen, he was manning a machine gun. After the battle, his body was found riddled with seventy-six bullets. A doctor later determined that twenty-six wounds had been sustained before he died.

For their heroism, Lieutenant Colonel O'Brien, Sergeant Baker, and Captain Salomon were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military honor. A fourth soldier of the 27th, Private Alejandro R. Renteria, was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions at Okinawa. For their service over the course of the war, twenty-one more men from the 27th Division were honored with the Distinguished Service Cross, two with the Distinguished Service Medal, 412 with the Silver Star, and 936 with the Bronze Star Medal.

Of the 1,107 men in the 105th Infantry of the 27th Division, 406 were killed and 512 were wounded on Saipan. The 71,000 American soldiers and Marines on the island suffered more than 14,000 killed, wounded, or missing. Over 30,000 Japanese are estimated to have died.

The 165th Infantry marches from the rail station at Ogdensburg, New York to train at DeKalb Junction, in August, 1940. The following month, President Franklin D. Roosevelt would sign the Selective Service and Training Act, the first peacetime conscription in U.S. history.



The 27th Division was the best-trained National Guard unit in the country.

The library and archival holdings in the Veterans Research Center of the New York State Military Museum in Saratoga Springs (www.dmna.state.ny.us) consist of a 2,000-volume library of military and state history, over 6,000 photographs, unit history files, broadsides, scrapbooks, letters, and maps. Highlights include more than 2,300 Civil War photographs; a collection of Civil War-era newspaper clippings arranged by New York units; and New York National Guard service cards and records from the 1880s to 1965, including original records associated with the 27th Division.

Division that dated back to World War I.

The unit received orders for overseas duty in early February, 1942. Departing from San Francisco on February 27, its advance elements landed at Hilo Harbor, Hawaii on March 10, signaling the beginning of the longest wartime overseas deployment of any National Guard division during World War II.

The 27th would go on to fight in some of the costliest campaigns of the war. It took part in the invasions of Butaritari Island–Makin Atoll, Majuro, Eniwetok Island, and the Marianas. It suffered horrific losses at Saipan in June–July, 1944 (see sidebar on previous page) when it was engaged in a joint action with the 4th Marine Division. And in April, 1945, the 27th participated in operations against Okinawa. During its

term of service to the nation, the Division suffered 1,512 killed in action, 4,980 wounded in action, and 332 who died of their wounds.

New York's Own

In 1949, Captain Edmund Love recalled that “To a man who served in such a unit in wartime, the infantry division was home. Before he joined it, the designation, whether number or name, meant nothing.” Love noted that as soldiers fought and suffered with their comrades in the field, an intense loyalty developed, generating close personal ties. They also developed strong bonds to their division, often reacting to criticism of the unit as a personal affront.

Yet the foundation for the comradeship of the 27th Division had been forged in the gritty industrial cities and

armories back home in New York, and was only made stronger by the shared experiences in the humid camps of Anniston and fortified by the unit's participation in the 1941 maneuvers. Even today, as New York's National Guard mobilizes for extended service in Iraq, many of the 27th's World War II veterans vividly remember the stifling heat of Fort McClellan, the weary marches through Louisiana, and the foreboding that accompanied their trip west as they, and the nation, finally went to war. ■