

PITTSBURGH, 1914: 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF VFW'S FIRST CONVENTION

A century ago the newly named Veterans of Foreign Wars met in Pennsylvania to chart a new course for America's overseas veterans.

BY RICHARD K. KOLB

BELOW: Delegates to the first VFW convention tour the H.J. Heinz plant Sept. 17, 1914. Only the first 10 in the first row can be identified: Fred J. McGuire, Samuel T. Rodgers, Benjamin L. Lloyd, Dr. Charles E. Locke, Col. John B. Schoeffel, Gus E. Hartur Rice W. Means, Robert C. Woodside, A.L. Bing and Samuel Smith.

Europe was at war in the summer of 1914. On Aug. 4, only about five weeks before the momentous gathering of VFW members in Pittsburgh occurred, Germany had invaded Belgium. World War I was about to alter Western history, and VFW was on the cusp of explosive growth.

Meanwhile, wars started in the last years of the 19th century had produced an array of overseas veterans' organizations. Following in the footsteps of their Civil War predecessors, returnees from Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines and China formed what were essentially regimental associations. These, however, soon broadened to base membership on overseas theaters of operation.

Pennsylvania was a fertile recruiting ground. Three separate groups of veterans from Altoona, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia merged in 1903 to become the American Veterans of Foreign Service (AVFS). Two years later, in September 1905, the Pennsylvania AVFS united with the AVFS of Columbus, Ohio (created Sept. 29, 1899, as VFW's original organization).

To further expand, AVFS joined forces with a Philippines War group based in Denver eight years later on Aug. 20, 1913. Hoping to satisfy veterans of all three major war theaters, the group temporarily adopted the all-encompassing name of Army of the Philippines, Cuba and Puerto Rico until a referendum could be held on selecting a new name.

CHOOSING A NAME

General Order No. 1, issued Sept. 12, 1913, formalized the consolidation. Local chapters were designated "Posts." But there were dissenters from the unification, and some Posts bolted. After all, sectional (East vs. West) and war zone pride (Far East vs.



Caribbean theaters) had to be overcome. So committees were authorized to meet and iron out the details of amalgamation.

Twenty-five members from eight Posts in Pennsylvania met in Philadelphia on March 28-29, 1914, according to VFW's historian in the early 1920s, J.I. Billman. A constitution was created, with *Section 1 of Article 1* proposing Veterans of Foreign Wars as the name for the new organization. They also decided to hold the first convention in Pittsburgh and have delegates officially endorse the unification.

In the meantime, a referendum was conducted. General Order No. 6, issued April 15, 1914, put the choice of a name to a vote. Members voted by Post. Some 31 Posts, then the majority, selected VFW. Referendum results were officially announced Aug. 1, 1914, through General Order No. 10.

The early founders' goal had been accomplished: creation of a veterans' organization broad enough in eligibility to include vets of all future foreign wars and by design be everlasting.

FIRST VFW CONVENTION AND HEADQUARTERS

As planned, delegates convened in Pittsburgh from Sept. 14-17, 1914. They met at the Schenley Hotel, then the city's most elite public accommodation. Fittingly, the hotel was built in 1898—the same year as the Spanish-American War that gave birth to VFW's founding societies.

An initial roll call of the number of delegates each Post was entitled to indicated 57 Posts with a combined 246 del-



VFW FILE PHOTO

egates. Eleven Posts had a blank delegate space in the listing. The published proceedings of the convention later stated 65 Posts in good standing then existed.

This first convention achieved the desired end. "Be it Resolved, by this encampment, that we unite and consolidate with the said society," read the resolution, "heretofore known as the Army of the Philippines, Cuba and Puerto Rico

under the name of Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States." The remainder of the gathering was devoted to rather mundane matters.

During the convention, the Maine Memorial—one of only three in America incorporating parts of the *USS Maine*—was dedicated Sept. 16. The battleship's torpedo tube and armored porthole constitute its center. Names of those killed in the

explosion are inscribed on three tablets.

Honoring Allegheny County residents who served in the Spanish-American War, it cost \$7,000 to build. On the day of the dedication, a military parade, including VFW members, marched to West Park, now part of the Allegheny Commons. VFW had launched a tradition—publicly honoring the war dead—that has continued for 100 years.



THOMAS E. CRAGO

WILLIAM E. RALSTON

ROBERT G. WOODSIDE

Prominent Pennsylvania Players

Several founding father figures hailed from Pennsylvania and played a part in the convention and setting up headquarters in Pittsburgh. They were prominent in their own rights beyond leading VFW.

THOMAS E. CRAGO: As commander-in-chief from October 1914 to September 1915, he led the fledgling and newly named VFW. An 1893 graduate of Princeton (he attended there his senior year), he became a lawyer the following year.

As captain of K Company, 10th Pennsylvania Infantry, Crago engaged in combat first against the Spaniards in Manila on July 31, 1898. Then his unit fought Filipinos during the Philippines War at Manila, Tullahan River and Malolos. It departed July 1, 1899. He retired as a lieutenant colonel of the 10th in the Pennsylvania National Guard.

Crago served three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives between 1911 and 1923, first representing Pennsylvania's 23rd Congressional District and then as an at-large member. He died Sept. 12, 1925, at age 59.

WILLIAM E. RALSTON: At VFW's helm in 1917-18, he was in charge during the crucial WWI years. Graduating from the Pittsburgh School of Law in 1905, he practiced his profession while active in VFW affairs.

Ralston served in H Company, 10th Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment. His company participated in the same actions as Crago's in the Philippines.

Ralston was the first editor of *Foreign Service*, holding that position until August 1918. He died at 64 in 1942.

ROBERT G. WOODSIDE: One of the most illustrious VFW leaders ever, Woodside headed the American Veterans of Foreign Service for three terms (1910-11, 1911-12 and 1912-13) and VFW two times (1920-21 and 1921-22). He also found time to

be national commander of the Army and Navy Legion of Valor.

A member of the 10th Pennsylvania Infantry during the Spanish-American War and Philippines War, Woodside served with H Company. Starting as a private, he retired from the Pennsylvania National Guard as lieutenant colonel in October 1914. When WWI broke out, he was VFW's adjutant general (1914-17) but joined the fight after U.S. entry into the war.

Commissioned a captain in the regular Army in November 1917, Woodside took command of M Co., 38th Inf. Regt., 3rd Div. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, Silver Star and Purple Heart. On July 22, 1918, at Les Franquette Farm near Jaulgonne, France, he rallied a demoralized platoon and led it in protecting the battalion. Later, on Oct. 9 during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, he was wounded and was recuperating in the hospital when WWI ended.

While in Germany after the war, he recruited 3,000 VFW members, forming the Rock of the Marne Post 138.

Holding a law degree from the University of Pittsburgh, Woodside served as sheriff of Allegheny County from 1921-26. Then from 1928 to 1948, he was the county's controller. As vice chairman (1923-54) of the American Battle Monuments Commission, he helped establish overseas cemeteries and the Tomb of the Unknowns. His reward was a Presidential Medal of Freedom. Moreover, he was brigadier general in command of the Pennsylvania National Guard during WWII.

In addition, Woodside was president (1931-39) of the Board of Trustees of VFW's National Home for Children in Eaton Rapids, Mich. He died at 88 in St. Petersburg, Fla., on July 18, 1964.

Besides being the site of the first newly named VFW convention, Pittsburgh served as de facto headquarters. Until after WWI, headquarters shifted annually with the new commander-in-chief. Operations were conducted from his residence or place of business. Beginning in October 1914, that meant 329 Bakewell Building at Grant and then-Diamond streets. Thomas Crago of Pennsylvania served as Chief beginning then. Moreover, William Ralston, as editor of *Foreign Service* magazine, maintained the editorial office there through August 1918.

(Pittsburgh has another VFW claim to fame. Former President Theodore Roosevelt joined the organization there July 27, 1917, in the William Penn Hotel.)

The first genuinely permanent VFW HQ was established in New York City in late 1918. (VFW was incorporated under the laws of Washington, D.C., on June 14, 1919.) Member Walter I. Joyce offered rent-free space in a building he owned in lower Manhattan. It was located at 32 Union Square on the edge of Greenwich Village. Joyce became adjutant general (1917-20) and later director of Americanism.

Today, the former Schenley bustles with students. In 1956, the hotel was sold to the University of Pittsburgh. In 1983, it was named the William Pitt Union with the Tansky Family Lounge occupying the space of the original hotel lobby, which is restored to its original appearance. In 1967, the Pennsylvania Historical Commission placed a plaque on the block of the student union building. Located between 5th Avenue and Forbes Avenue, the preserved Schenley lobby stands as a shrine to VFW history.

ELIGIBILITY SPANS THE GLOBE

VFW's eligibility pool in 1914 totaled 295,665 overseas veterans from two wars, three campaigns and three occupations. The August-September 1914 issue of *The Veteran* (predecessor of *Foreign Service* and *VFW* magazine) listed those places based on campaign badge (medal) qualification. Apparently, before authorization of campaign medals in 1905, proof of service (discharge papers) on Cuba and Puerto Rico and in the Philippines and China was sufficient to qualify for membership. By 1916, however, VFW counted

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Original VFW Eligibility Pool

WAR/CAMPAIGN/DUTY	YEARS	OVERSEAS	DATE MEDAL ESTABLISHED*
Spanish-American	1898	72,339	1905/1908
Cuban Occupation	1898-1902	45,000	1915
Puerto Rico Occupation	1898-99	16,253	1919
Philippines	1899-1902	128,073	1905/1908
China (Boxer Rebellion)	1900-01	6,000	1905/1908
Moro (Philippines)†	1902-13	20,000	1905/1908
Cuban Pacification	1906-09	6,000	1909
Nicaraguan	1912	2,000	1913



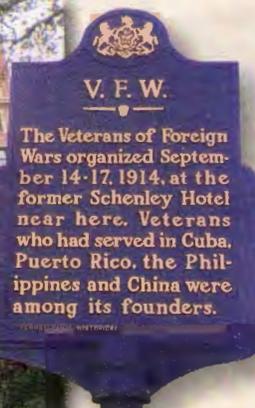
Philippine Insurrection Medal

* In the case of the Spanish-American War, Philippines War and China Relief Expedition, the Army authorized its campaign medals three years before the Navy/Marine Corps. However, the Navy created the first campaign medal—the West Indies Naval Campaign Medal—on March 3, 1901.

† Membership eligibility extended to U.S. Army officers who served in the Philippine Constabulary and Scouts.

Note: Although the Vera Cruz (Mexico) invasion and occupation occurred from April to November 1914, its 13,678 veterans did not technically become eligible for membership until 1917-18 when the Mexican Service Medal was authorized by all services. That also applied to the U.S. Army cavalry units that served along the Mexican border between 1911 and 1914.

PHOTO BY RICH KOEHL/VFW



ABOVE: The former Schenley Hotel, now the William Pitt Union at the University of Pittsburgh, was the site of the first VFW convention. A sign on the block marks its historical significance to VFW.

Offices within the Bakewell building in Pittsburgh—the red brick structure in the foreground—served as the organization's first headquarters. It was located at the present-day corner of Forbes Avenue and Grant Street.

VFW's Centennial

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only 4,173 members.

Interestingly enough, the September 1920 issue of *Foreign Service* proudly proclaimed the most comprehensive list of eligible actions ever published to date. It noted that a campaign badge "or mark designating foreign service—such as the 'Gold Chevron'"—made a veteran eligible for membership.

That list went well past the wars and overseas campaigns of the day. It actually extended eligibility beyond the grave! Navy and Marine Corps landings and expeditions as far back as 1798 were included. Marines and sailors from the *USS Constitution* landed in 1800 on Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic) to spike the cannons of an enemy fort during the Quasi-War with France (1798-1801).

Also making the cut were expeditions in East Asia and the South Pacific, including Sumatra (1832), Fiji (1840), China (1855), Formosa (1867) and Korea (1871). Keep in mind that even the Marine Corps Expeditionary Medal

(1929) and Navy Expeditionary Medal (1936) never retroactively recognized any actions before 1874.

Perhaps most intriguing was inclusion of the Mexican War (1846-48)—America's first foreign land war fought 72 years earlier. But lo and behold, at least 10 vets of that war were recruited, with the last dying in 1929. These first gold stripe crusaders were, as Pennsylvania VFW historian O.D. Lavan put it, connected to the organization through a "relationship by blood."

It should be noted that VFW owes its existence largely to four Army regiments. Virtually all of the original members who formed the organizations that ultimately made up VFW hailed from the regular 17th U.S. Infantry, 1st Colorado Infantry, 10th Infantry of the Pennsylvania National Guard and the 28th U.S. Volunteer Infantry. The latter was a federal unit raised specifically for the Philippines War (1899-1902) and enlisted in Pennsylvania.

Regimental camaraderie brought these vets together long after the crucible of combat. And that's what the

Veterans of Foreign Wars is still all about 100 years after the founding convention made ours a household name. ✪

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EDITOR'S NOTES: To celebrate this landmark event, the University of Pennsylvania is hosting Generation of Service—The VFW Centennial Celebration and the University of Pittsburgh at the William Pitt Union on Sept. 16. For details, contact Ron Poropatich at (301) 789-4400 or e-mail RKP19@pitt.edu.

In addition, Franklin Park Borough is dedicating a plaque honoring Robert G. Woodside at his former home, Stone Mansion, which is now a funeral home. For details, contact historian Debby Rabold at (412) 364-4115, ext. 309 or e-mail fp@history@franklinparkborough.us.

VFW's national convention will be held in Pittsburgh in 2015 with John Biedrzycki, a native of that city, taking office as commander-in-chief. A century later, the organization has come full circle.

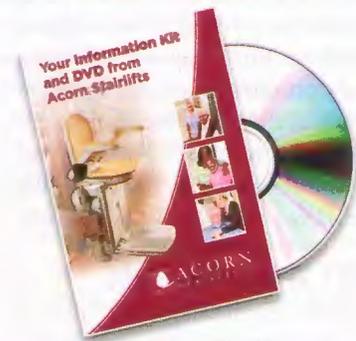
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