The Tip of the Mitt Journal

WWI Polar Bear Expedition

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by Richard A. Wiles

First published in the November 2019 issue of the Mackinac Journal

Men of the 339th Infantry during the Polar Bear Expedition (photo courtesy of the Petoskey Public Library)

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The "Great War," also known as the "War to End All Wars," came to an end on June 28, 1919. The actual fighting had ceased back on Nov. 11, 1918, at the 11th hour of the day. However, the war was to continue for the 339th Army Infantry Regiment of the state of Michigan, known as the "Polar Bears." Their war began on Sept. 18, 1918, and did not end until June 19, 1919, just a few days before the World War I peace treaty was signed. Northern Michigan sent many young men to fight in WWI, some even served in this Polar Bear regiment of the United States Army.

World War I began on July 28, 1914, and before it ended four years later, engaged over 70 million soldiers from several nations of the world. Most historians consider the war to be one of the deadliest conflicts in history. Over 16 million combatants and civilians died from the warfare, and it is estimated that over 50 million more deaths were caused by the practice of genocide and the horrific spread of the Spanish influenza. The cause of the conflict has always been considered convoluted, however, as a result of various entangling alliances. Germany went to war against France and Rus-

sia. That eventually led to Britain, and finally the United States, becoming militarily involved by April of 1917.

Most of the combat took place along the French, Belgium and German borders. The German intent was to quickly invade and neutralize France, its declared enemy to the west, and then turn east to fight a second war front against Russia. That strategy, however, never materialized. Once Germany invaded Belgium on its way into France, Great Britain was obligated by treaty to enter the war on behalf of the Belgium people. That happened on Aug. 4, 1914. Meanwhile, the Austria-Hungary Empire sided with Germany forming the Central Powers. Their opponents, the Allied Powers, grew to include Japan and the Ottoman Empire, and eventually, the United States of America.

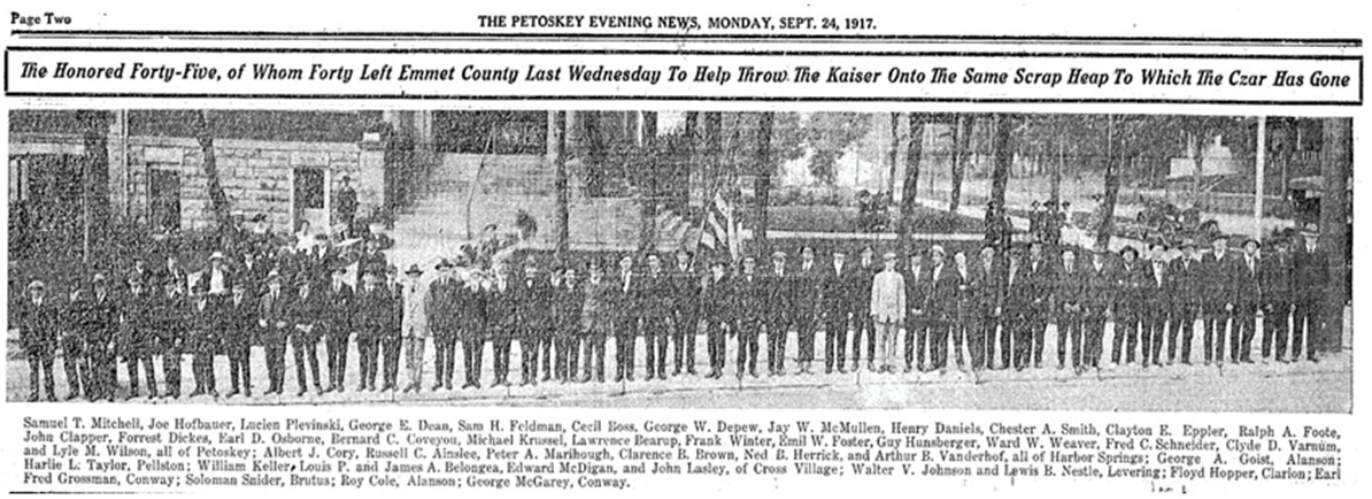
The United States was unprepared for its entrance into the war. The standing army in 1917 was less than 130,000 soldiers. Even though a German U-Boat had sunk the British ocean liner Lusitania early on in the war (May 7, 1915) causing the death of nearly 100 American citizens, many in this country did not want to participate in a European conflict. Also, many German immigrants in the United States supported Germany. The British and French were eager for American help. However, President Woodrow Wilson campaigned in the 1916 election on the slogan "He Kept Us Out of War." On Nov. 7, 1916, a German U-Boat sunk the American steamer Columbia, and in March of 1917, a U-Boat torpedoed the American merchant ship Algonquin. President Wilson then asked Congress to declare war against Germany on April 2, 1917. That meant the United States needed to quickly build an army. It already had a significant navy.

American soldier "Dough Boy" uniform and brass buttons (images courtesy of the Petoskey Public Library)

Congress passed a conscription (draft) bill in May of 1917 calling for all men between the ages of 21 and 31 to sign up. President Wilson soon issued a draft call of 500,000-plus men. In July, the National Guard was placed into service. Then the military realized they did not have enough troop transport ships to send the new army to Europe. President Wilson signed an executive order in August of 1917 taking over all large American merchant and cruise ships. The first small contingent of American soldiers arrived in France in June of 1917. They numbered some 14,000; however, they were deemed too green for immediate battle. The British military felt the Americans were just too untrained and ill-equipped to be sent to the front lines on the Western Front.

By May of 1918 over one million American soldiers were stationed in France. They were referred to as "dough boys" by the British because the brass buttons on their uniforms looked like a food of the same name in Britain (flour dumplings or dough cakes). Meanwhile, the American public referred to its own troops as "Sammies" after Uncle Sam. The first major battle involving the Sammies took place in early October of 1918 at the Battle of Cantigny, and that American effort was successful.

The first group of men from Emmet County to leave for the war included those from Petoskey, Conway, Harbor Springs, Alanson, Pellston, and Cross Village. Most of them reported to Battle Creek's Camp Custer where many would fall to the Spanish flu pandemic which was then affecting most of the country's military camps. By the time the war had ended in November of 1918, almost all the deaths of Petoskey recruits were due to the flu. Only Petoskey's Army Corporal Carl Weaver was killed in action (Oct. 5, 1918). He died in one of the first battle engagements in France by the United States military. Other Emmet County combat deaths involved Harbor Springs' Corporal Lee M. Smith, Private Stanley



Page Two THE PETOSKEY EVENING NEWS, MONDAY, SEPT. 24, 1917.

The Honored Forty-Five, of Whom Forty Left Emmet County Last Wednesday To Help Throw The Kaiser Onto The Same Scrap Heap To Which The Czar Has Gone

Samuel T. Mitchell, Joe Hofbauer, Lucien Plevinski, George E. Dean, Sam H. Feldman, Cecil Boss, George W. Depew, Jay W. McMullen, Henry Daniels, Chester A. Smith, Clayton E. Eppler, Ralph A. Foote, John Clapper, Forrest Dickes, Earl D. Osborne, Bernard C. Coveyou, Michael Krussel, Lawrence Bearup, Frank Winter, Emil W. Foster, Guy Hunsberger, Ward W. Weaver, Fred C. Schneider, Clyde D. Varnum, and Lyle M. Wilson, all of Petoskey; Albert J. Cory, Russell C. Ainslee, Peter A. Marihough, Clarence B. Brown, Ned B. Herrick, and Arthur B. Vanderhof, all of Harbor Springs; George A. Goist, Alanson; Harlie L. Taylor, Pellston; William Keller, Louis P. and James A. Belongea, Edward McDigan, and John Lasley, of Cross Village; Walter V. Johnson and Lewis B. Nestle, Levering; Floyd Hopper, Clarion; Earl Fred Grossman, Conway; Soloman Snider, Brutus; Roy Cole, Alanson; George McGarey, Conway.

Hoover and Private Wallace Budlong, Cross Village's Private Alex Kagebitang, Levering's Private Wesley Keller, Private George Sweeney, and Private Marion Thompson and Mackinaw City's Private Clayton Murray.

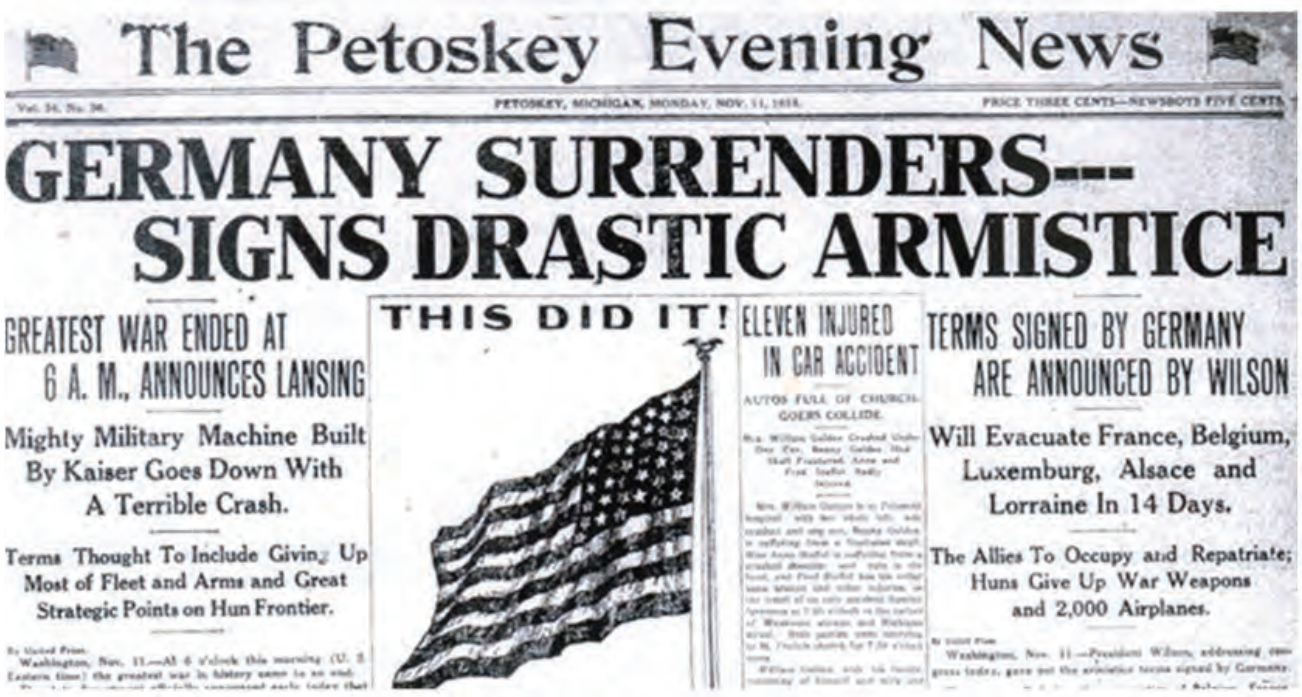
Cheboygan County's combat casualties included Sergeant Michael Bovie, Private Stephen Romes, Private Alberic Duerwaerder, Private Arthur Morgan (Topinabee), Private John Pilon, Private Frank Rivers. Also taken in action was St. Ignace's Sergeant Thomas Grant and Private Richard Meyers.

Nearby Onaway's killed-in-action enlistees included Corporal Ivan McPherson, bugler Joseph Gilmette and Private Fred Campbell.

In Charlevoix County, Private Ray George DeButts, Private Thomas M. Johnson and Private Ernest Peterson, all of Boyne City were combat victims.

The war in France would last for only one more month, however the Americans during that short time period lost thousands of soldiers. Overall, from June of 1917 through the war's end, some 53,000 American men went missing or were killed in action. Also, another 63,000 American deaths were caused by accidents or the Spanish flu. Meanwhile, when all fighting along the Western Front ceased with the Nov. 11, 1918, truce, Michigan troops were still engaged in battle. The 339th Infantry regiment based in Detroit was made up of soldiers from all parts of Michigan, including the Tip of the Mitt.

Germany's plan of taking on France and Russia at the same time back in 1914 caused them to fight on two fronts, the Western Front with France, and the Eastern Front with Russia. The plan was to quickly subdue France and then put an all-out effort towards the Russians. However, when Britain entered the war, the strategy quickly changed. The Russian Eastern Front was along the borders



The Petoskey Evening News

PETOSKEY, MICHIGAN, MONDAY, NOV. 11, 1918. PRICE THREE CENTS—NEWSBOYS FIVE CENTS

GERMANY SURRENDERS--- SIGNS DRASTIC ARMISTICE

GREATEST WAR ENDED AT 6 A. M., ANNOUNCES LANSING

Mighty Military Machine Built By Kaiser Goes Down With A Terrible Crash.

Terms Thought To Include Giving Up Most of Fleet and Arms and Great Strategic Points on Hun Frontier.

THIS DID IT!

ELEVEN INJURED IN CAR ACCIDENT

AUTOS FULL OF CHURCH-GOERS COLLIDE.

TERMS SIGNED BY GERMANY ARE ANNOUNCED BY WILSON

Will Evacuate France, Belgium, Luxemburg, Alsace and Lorraine In 14 Days.

The Allies To Occupy and Repatriate; Huns Give Up War Weapons and 2,000 Airplanes.

WEATHER Fair. The Detroit Free Press FINAL EDITION

MICHIGAN'S GREATEST NEWSPAPER

DETROIT, MICHIGAN, THURSDAY, APRIL 11, 1918.—EIGHTEEN PAGES. PRICE: TWO CENTS

STEEL HELMETED AND SEASONED 339th, DETROIT'S OWN, PARADES WOODWARD AVENUE

of Lithuania, Poland, Romania and the Ukraine. In March of 1917, a group of Russian revolutionaries inspired by Vladimir Lenin overthrew the Russian Tsar (Czar) Nicholas II whose Romanov family had ruled Russia since the early 1600s.

The war with Germany and its ally, the Austro-Hungarian Empire had taken a great toll on the Russian people and once Czar Nicholas abdicated his throne, the Russian Army basically threw down their rifles and headed for home. A new Russian provisional government was set up in July with Alexander Kerensky serving as its head. That government lasted only until October when a second revolution erupted with Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky fighting over who would be the new leader. Both were members of the Bolshevik (meaning "majority) Party and, by early 1918, with Lenin now in power, a civil war erupted between the Bolsheviks (Red Army) and the "White Russians," who were in favor of restoring the monarchy. This group, along with certain allied forces such as Britain and the United States, feared a communist rule in Russia.

So, while allied forces on the Western Front were heading home, President Woodrow Wilson decided to aid the Russian White Army forces in northern Russia and Siberia with a contingent of American troops. For this mission, the Michigan 339th Infantry was chosen since it was believed the Michigan men knew better how to fight and survive bitter winters. The force was composed of men from Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, Wisconsin, Kentucky and members of Michigan's National Guard. They came together and trained at Battle Creek, Camp Custer, and thus were known as the Custer Division.

The American North Russia Expeditionary Force (about 5,000 troops), nick-named the Polar Bears, landed in England in July of 1918.

Tip of the Mitt residents included in the regiment were:

- 2nd Lieutenant Hugh McPhail, Petoskey
- Private John Keller, Cross Village
- Private Peter Grawey, Cheboygan
- Private Edward Schultz, Cheboygan
- Private Arthur Prince, Onaway
- Private Robert Campbell, Onaway
- Private John Rompinen, Wolverine
- Private Stanley Smith, Wolverine
- Private William Wyant, Boyne City
- Private Arthur Mason, Boyne City
- Private Ward Underhill, Boyne City
- Private Lawrence Montgomery, Charlevoix

Also serving in northern Russia in the 310th Engineering Regiment were:

- Ewald Billeau, Petoskey
- Charles Ellingsen, Petoskey
- Ernie Hermann, Boyne City
- Edward Herman, Boyne City

The American military expedition into northern Russia had been suggested by the British. They were worried the new Boleshevik government, led by Lenin, might send all the allied military supplies they possessed to aid Germany. Since Lenin had signed a peace treaty with Germany in March of 1918, the British and French felt it imperative to protect those supplies sitting on the docks at the Russian port cities of Murmansk and Archangel in the east (near Finland), and Vladivostok, in the west, (near North Korea). Also fighting in northern Russia was a volunteer military group made up of European Czechs and Slovaks known as the Czech Legionnaires. They were fighting with Britain and France in order to win their homeland independence from the Austrian-Hungary empire.

President Woodrow Wilson and his advisors did not want the United States to become embroiled in a long, drawn-out, Russian campaign. However, by August of 1918, Wilson gave into to British and French demands and ordered General John Pershing, head of the American Expeditionary Force in Europe, to pick a regiment to go into Russia. Their supposed sole purpose was to guard Allied war materials. Pershing picked the 339th Infantry Regiment from Michigan (and other Midwest states). Over 90% of the 3,800 soldiers in the 339th came from Michigan, with some 70% from the Detroit area.

"We Finish With The Bayonet"
(motto in Russian: The bayonet decides)

The, in mid-August 1918, the regiment, while stationed outside London, were ordered to surrender their Lee-Enfield rifles, and, as author James Nelson reported in his 2019 book, "The Polar Bear Expedition," "in turn were supplied with Mosin-Nagant 7.62 rifles ... guns made in America, purchased by the Russian Czar, and stored near London awaiting shipment to the Russian Imperial Army which had collapsed (in March of 1918)."

Supposedly, the reason for the rifle switch had been based upon the belief that a large amount of ammunition for these firearms was waiting for the men when they arrived in Russia. Also, the Browning machine guns from the U.S. Army were replaced with the British-made Vicker machine guns since Wilson and Pershing had put their soldiers under the command of the British Army. Finally, the 339th's American Army uniforms were shed

in favor of a British wool uniform, along with mukluk-style boots. These changes were the beginnings of a severe morale problem for the men of the 339th, who believed when they enlisted (or were drafted), they would be going to France to participate in "the Big Show." Thus, the Polar Bears draftees became reluctant participants in an unlikely war that none of them intended to fight.

On the way to Russia from England abroad transport ships, the Spanish Flu broke out among the soldiers eventually amounting to nearly 100 deaths. The American contingent of men sent into the port of Archangel was composed of the Michigan 339th Infantry and First Battalion of the Michigan 310th Engineers. They

arrived in port on Sept. 4, 1918, and were met by British forces already in place. Previous to the arrival of the Brits, the Red Army Bolsheviks had arrived and looted the stockpile of Allied war materials the Americans had been sent to protect. That changed the American mission. The British commanders split up the 339th into two groups, both now to take an offensive against the Bolsheviks. Meanwhile, the White Army of the area had formed a new government titled the Sovereign Government of Northern Russia.

Part of the Michigan Polar Bears were sent south along the Volodga Railroad toward the village of Obozerskaya. The second group of Polar Bears headed down the Dvina River on barges toward the village of Bereznik. On Sept. 15, 1918, the Bolsheviks (called Bolos by the Americans) attacked the Polar Bears outside of Obozerskaya, thus the mission outlined by President Wilson for the 339th Infantry turned from

protection of military stores, to fighting the Red Army for survival. This meant for the Americans, the need for a graveyard near Obozerkaya. Meanwhile, the Red Army also engaged the second group of Polar Bears near the Dvina River village of Seltso on Sept. 19, 1918.

For the next six weeks the American Polar Bears kept on the offensive until the Siberian winter settled in. The Americans had advanced as far south as the village of Unst Padenga – Shenkurst on the Vaga River. There on Jan. 23, 1919, the Polar Bears met such fierce Red Army resistance that they had to retreat in temperatures of 45-degrees-below-zero in deep, freshly fallen snow. Petoskey's 2nd Lieutenant Hugh McPhail gave cover to his retreating men by operating a machine gun in one of the town's church towers. McPhail was to be later decorated by the British military with the British Military Cross.

Eventually, the Russian villages were abandoned by the Allies with the trek north that began through an increasingly hostile area of Red Army soldiers and sympathizers. The Polar Bears numbered close to 1,000 soldiers at the time of their retreat north. McPhail's Company A retreated back to the small village of Yevievskaya along the Vaga River.

Nelson said, "They would dub the village Potatoville or Spudville because of the stores of potatoes, turnips, and onions that were found buried in straw in one home."

The villagers had fled and left behind their livestock which were quickly butchered for food. For the next month, Company A would rest quietly until moving further north in March to Maximovskaya, a short distance from Vistafka. Both villages were attacked by Red Army soldiers on March 9, 1919. The enemy machine gun fire was unrelenting as McPhail and his men crawled north out of the village under cover of darkness. They eventually made it to the village Mala Berezniki. However, since mid-January, Company A sustained 18 deaths and another 17 missing in action along with many being wounded. Nelson commented in his book, "It was a hell of a price to pay for that long-forgotten, supposedly simple mission of guarding stores at Archangel."

John Bodnar, author of "Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century," said that two types of military memory, the vernacular and the official, exist in the United States. The official memory is crafted by the governmental officials. The vernacular memory is made up of localized memories of those directly impacted. The vernacular memory often conflicts with that of the official memory, as many Vietnam veterans will attest.

A winter of fighting Bolsheviks and wondering why they were still in combat when the war with Germany had ended led to severe morale problems among the Polar Bear soldiers. They had suffered greatly in the scrub woods of polar Russia. By March of 1919, after five grueling months, petitions began to surface signed by some of the men stating they no longer wished to fight the Bolos. Earlier in March, some French troops, also

LIEUT. M'PHAIL TELLS OF RUSSIA

WAS THROUGH CAMPAIGN ON DVINA RIVER.

Describes Battle Experiences and Life in Land of Bolsheviki. Spoke at First Christian Church.

Last evening, before a large audience at the First Christian church, Lieutenant Hugh McPhail, of Company A, 339th infantry, American forces in north Russia, told in a most interesting manner, some of his personal experiences in the land of the bolsheviki.

He described the habits, customs and churches of the people of north Russia.

Lieutenant McPhail said that when he and his men entered Russia they were sent down to the Dvina river, sleeping upon coils of barbed wire while making the trip. As the bolsheviki retreated south they took as much food as possible and destroyed the remaining crops, leaving almost nothing for the Allied forces. For days, the only obtainable food was turnips about the size of marbles.

In describing his battle experiences, he told how his "hunch" had aided him many times in escaping from danger, uninjured, and how the men, in their retreat from the Dvina river front, had marched, fought and cared for their wounded for days, without food or sleep.

When asked why the Americans were kept in Russia, Lieutenant McPhail said that they were sent there to establish a northern front and after the armistice was signed it was "fight for their lives" most of the three hundred miles back to Archangel

Monday, Aug. 4, 1919
Petoskey Evening News

under the command of British officers, rioted against further participation in the northern Russian war.

The April 11, 1919, *Detroit Free Press* reported in a front-page article under the headline Mutiny Spirit Fills Entente Russia Force, "The War Department issued an official statement confirming what amounted to a mutiny among the American troops there (Archangel) on March 30, 1919. A company of infantry refused to move to the front … Open threats were made of general mutiny unless a definite statement from Washington ensuring the general withdrawal was forthcoming … The official report also states that both British and French troops have been involved …"


GRAND RAPIDS, MICH., FRIDAY MORNING, APRIL 11,

MUTINY IN RUSSIA

GENERAL OUTBREAK AMONG 339TH MEN NOW OPEN THREAT

WHEN SHALL WE GO HOME? BOYS WANT TO KNOW

MICHIGAN BOYS DEMAND DEFINITE INFORMATION AS TO THEIR WITHDRAWAL

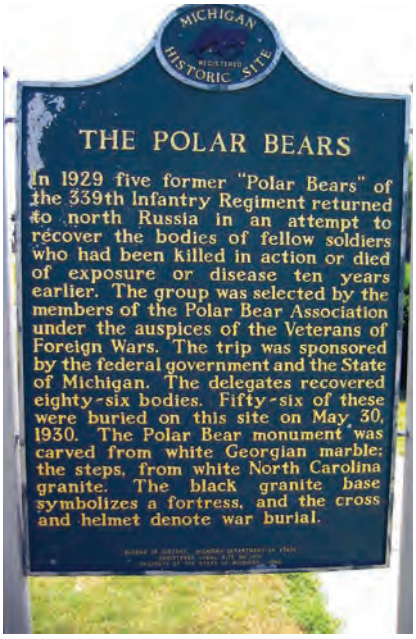
Back in February of 1919, Michigan state senator Herbert Baker had intro-

duced a resolution into the Michigan legislature calling upon President Wilson to withdraw all American troops from Russia. The 339th regimental commander Col. George Stewart had notified the War Department by cablegram on Feb. 13, 1919, that, "Due to primitive conditions of life and continuous service in the field under Arctic conditions the 339th's officers and men were beginning to feel the strain."

Back in Detroit, thousands of Polar Bear family members and others signed petitions to Congress demanding the military bring their soldiers home from Russia.

Even members of the loyalist White Army began to mutiny, killing some of their Russian officers. Then of April 17, 1919, a new commander arrived in Archangel —General Wilds Richardson, who came with a plan for withdrawing all the American troops from that area. Soon after, the 339th Infantry and others began withdrawing north to Archangel. By June, new British and White Russian soldiers arrived to take the place of the departing Polar Bears. The Americans were forced to leave behind 127 bodies buried in the Arctic tundra. On board with the homebound troops were another 108 bodies — men who died while serving in northern Russia. An official Army report on the American intervention called it "an ultimate abject failure."

According to an October 1919 Army report, the United States military lost 553 men, 109 of them killed in action



(others to disease, accidents, suicides, etc.) and 305 wounded. While most Americans, including people who live today in Michigan, have either forgotten about, or never have heard of this bizarre Russian war with American soldiers, those in Russia have never forgotten the episode. In 1922, the Polar Bear Association was started in Detroit with the specific purpose of bringing home the 127 soldiers left behind. Finally, on July 18, 1929, enough money had been raised to send what was referred to as the Michigan Commission to Archangel to locate and bring their remains home. The Commission was able to locate 86 bodies and identify 84 of them. All 15 of Petoskey's Lt. Hugh McPhail's Company A men who had gone missing in action were retrieved. On Memorial Day, May 30, 1930, the remains of 56 AEFNR soldiers were buried in plots surrounding the Polar Bear Memorial at the White Chapel Cemetery in Troy, Michigan. They were given full military honors.

Richard A. Wiles is a retired history and reading instructor at Petoskey High School and a former Spring Arbor University class instructor in research. He has written five White Paper research projects for the Petoskey Public Library involving historical events in the area, including the crash of the B-52 Air Force bombing trainer into Little Traverse Bay in 1971.

Wiles holds a Bachelor's degree in history from the University of Toledo, a Master's degree in reading development-psychology from Michigan State University and an Educational Specialist degree in community leadership from Central Michigan University.

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Polar Bear Memorial at White Chapel Cemetery in Troy, Michigan

The Presque Isle County men who served in northern Russia included: Theodore Bruning, Private, Company B, 310th Engineers, Charles Hoffman, Private, Company C, 310th Engineers, Chester Francis, Company B, 339th infantry, Roland Rains, Private, Company B, 310th Engineers, Henry Vought Jr., and Theofiel Nowicki. Three men who were drafted while living in Detroit, but had family or connections in Presque Isle County, and served in northern Russia were John Klimaszewski, Private First Class, Headquarters Company, 339th Infantry, William A. Comfort and Arthur Prince.

John Klimaszewski wrote a letter to his parents, Albert and Mary in Posen, while he was in Russia, which the *Advance* printed. His letter was dated April 1st, 1919. After an opening paragraph about receiving his parents' letter and his feeling fine, he writes, "... am still in the same organization and still in the Archangel District. We were told that we would go out of here by the first of June but are not sure of that, hope it will be sooner. They are fighting a good bit down here and it is getting worse... have not been in a battle yet although I can hear the cannon quite often. We are not afraid of the Bolsheviki — they will never get us. We are having fine weather up here lately. Shines just like summertime but it is still winter. Today is about the first day snow is really thawing at all and that is only between cars on the tracks otherwise winter is still as strong as ever. " (May 29, 1919)

In any combat situation there are casualties, dead, wounded or missing. During the North Russia campaign, the American forces suffered more than 110 deaths from battle, about 30 missing and 70 deaths from disease, most of which were caused by influenza, the Spanish flu. One of the missing was Corporal Arthur Prince, one time resident of Onaway. On March 1, 1919, he was in command of a patrol which was ambushed. Trying to reach one of his men, he was wounded in the knee, his leg was broken at the hip, and another bullet struck him in the side as he was crawling to the American line. He was captured by the Bolsheviks. After 17 months in Russia, suffering in hospitals and a concentration camp for anti-Bolshevik prisoners, he was permitted to leave Russia. After leaving Russia he was quarantined in Finland for two weeks in accordance with regulations imposed on all persons leaving Russia. He returned to his home in Detroit.

— Gerald Micketti