

History of the 126th Infantry

For more than 150 years the Grand Rapids Guard has responded to calls to action from community and country. From 1846 when Grand Rapids volunteers were part of Michigan's regiment in the Mexican War to 1996 when they served as part of the security force for the Olympic games in Atlanta, members of the guard have seen action in five wars and responded to numerous calls to maintain domestic order during peacetime.

High points for the guard, today operating as the 3rd Battalion, 126th National Guard Infantry Regiment, came during wartime service. In the Civil War local soldiers served with distinction at Bull Run, Gettysburg, and other battlegrounds. In World War I, as part of the 32nd (Red Arrow) Division, the guard received France's highest military honor. After World War I, the 126th adopted the motto "Courage Without Fear" and ultimately demonstrated the correctness of those words with its valiant service in the Pacific during World War II.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War in 1989, the Grand Rapids Guard's size was reduced and its role changed. Today, members uphold the unit's long tradition of service with peacetime operations at home and in such distant places as Panama and Latvia.

Founding the Grand Rapids Guard

In the 19th century, the United States maintained only a small standing army, depending upon state volunteer troops in time of crisis. Prior to 1855, Grand Rapids area military companies were enrolled as part of Michigan's 16th Brigade, commanded by Brigadier General Solomon Withey. Several members of the unit served in the Mexican War. Following the war, in 1849, came the formation of the Grand Rapids Light Guard (renamed the Valley City Guards in 1857), which also served as the volunteer Alert Fire Company No. 1. The group was led by Captain Wright L. Coffinberry and Sergeant Major Daniel McConnell. Two other groups, the Grand Rapids Artillery Company and Ringgold's Light Artillery, were formed in 1854 and 1855, respectively. The three groups, which in 1858 combined to become the 51st Uniformed Michigan Regiment, trained at various locations around the city, with the Grand Rapids Artillery Company using the third floor of the new Union School building. A fourth group, the Grand Rapids Rifles, composed primarily of German immigrants, was added in 1859.

These forerunners of today's Grand Rapids National Guard unit conducted regular training sessions and held annual military balls beginning in 1856. In 1857, the Valley City Guards and a portion of Ringgold's Light Artillery were called out to quell a civil disturbance near Lowell when pay was withheld from about 250 railroad laborers. The incident, known locally as the "Lowell War," was settled peacefully before the troops arrived.

Civil War

Throughout the 1850s, slavery and sectional issues moved the United States toward a north-south conflict and portended a greater role for the guard. Southern rebels fired on Fort Sumter in April 1861, plunging the nation into a bloody Civil War. More than 4,000 Kent County soldiers participated before it was over.

Leading the response to President Abraham Lincoln's call for volunteers were the four Grand Rapids guard units organized in the 1850s. First, on April 20, came the Valley City Guards, under the command of Captain Samuel Judd. Other units quickly followed. With the addition of a newly created fifth Grand Rapids company, these units comprised half of the Third Michigan Infantry. After training briefly at Cantonment Anderson, south of the city, they left Grand Rapids on June 13, bound for Washington, D.C., and the Army of the Potomac.

The Third Michigan's first action, just 38 days after leaving Grand Rapids, came at Blackburn's Ford during the first battle of Bull Run. The volunteers' steady performance in this initial engagement presaged four years of fighting in twelve major engagements, including the Peninsula Campaign, second Bull Run, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, the Wilderness Campaign, Spotsylvania, Cold Harbor, Petersburg, and Appomatox.

Colonel Daniel McConnell first led the regiment, and when illness caused him to return to Grand Rapids, Colonel Stephen Champlin took his place. Other men also brought honor to the Third Michigan. One of Michigan's highest ranking officers, Brevet Brigadier General Byron Pierce, began the war as captain of the Third Michigan's Company K, and Private Benjamin Morse of Lowell won the Medal of Honor for heroic action at Spotsylvania.

Service Closer to Home

With the end of the Civil War, Grand Rapids' citizen-soldiers returned to their businesses and farms. Many belonged to active veterans' groups, and others continued their participation in state military companies. The Grand Rapids Guards, led by war hero George Judd, officially mustered into state service in November 1872, held weekly drills, and conducted a "sham battle" at the West Michigan State Fair the next year.

For several decades thereafter, the guard's primary activities were attending annual encampments, begun with a modest gathering at Reeds Lake in 1876 and continuing into the 20th century, and answering calls to quell local disturbances. In 1873 an unruly Muskegon crowd bent on vengeance toward a jailed child molester had to be calmed by

the guards. A year later they were called to Greenville to aid the Montcalm sheriff in his efforts to quiet a group of unpaid--and unhappy--lumberjacks.

Public celebrations and ceremonies also called for the guard's presence. Members strutted their stuff at Grand Rapids' 1876 celebration of the Centennial of the Declaration of Independence, and in 1881 they journeyed to Washington, D.C., to mark the centennial of the British surrender at Yorktown. Later, groups attended a drill competition in the nation's capitol and were present at the opening of the 1892 Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Two additional companies, the Custer Guard (1882) and the Innes Rifles (1884), joined the local ranks in the 1880s, swelling the numbers who attended the annual encampments.

On May 7, 1896, the three companies agreed to consolidate as the Grand Rapids Battalion of the 2nd Regiment, Michigan National Guard, led by Colonel William T. McGurrin. A fourth company, the White Guards, joined the battalion a year later. Less than two years after that, the guard would be called into service in the war against Spain.

The Spanish-American War

The end of the 19th century saw the final stages of the collapse of the Spanish empire. From the Philippine Islands in Asia to Cuba, just 90 miles off the Florida coast, the last of Spain's colonies struggled for independence. Concerned about unrest so close to America's shores and anxious to promote Cuban independence, President William McKinley sent the battleship Maine to Havana. When the vessel blew up under unexplained circumstances in March 1898, the United States responded with a declaration of war.

Called to active duty with other units from around the country, the Michigan National Guard's 2nd Regiment and its Grand Rapids Battalion reported to camp at Island Lake, near Brighton. Mustered into federal service as the 32nd Volunteer Infantry Regiment, the unit included companies from Coldwater, Kalamazoo, Battle Creek, Grand Haven, and Detroit along with the four companies of the Grand Rapids Battalion commanded by Captain Louis C. Covell.

The Spanish-American War did not last long or have many significant engagements. Michigan troops got no closer to the action than Tampa, Florida, before American victories caused Spain to sue for peace. In September the 32nd Volunteers returned to Michigan.

Maintaining Readiness

The Spanish-American War showed guard units from several states to be disorganized and unprepared. Congress responded with legislation that provided federal equipment and weapons, changed the guard's organization to more closely resemble the regular army, called for elevating guard officers to equal status with their federal counterparts, and required federal instruction and inspection. As a result, Grand Rapids Battalion officers received promotions and led a better-equipped and more active unit. Colonel William McGurrin became Michigan's brigadier general, and Captain Louis Covell advanced to major in command of the Grand Rapids Battalion. In 1914 the Hanson Military Reservation near Grayling was given to the State of Michigan to become the site of annual training encampments thereafter.

In addition to attending their regular summer encampments, including regional gatherings at Fort Benjamin Harrison near Indianapolis in 1906, 1908, and 1910, the members of the Grand Rapids Battalion responded to several calls to maintain order at home in the years after the Spanish American War. In 1899 and again in 1912, the unit, renamed the 32nd Michigan Infantry in 1915, was called to Jackson in the wake of prison riots; in 1910 the guardsmen secured Durand, Michigan, during a national railroad strike; and in 1912 they marched in President Woodrow Wilson's inaugural parade.

In 1916, unrest along the Mexican border tested the unit's preparation. Ordered to El Paso in June 1916 after Mexican revolutionary, Pancho Villa, raided Columbus, New Mexico, the regiment stayed on duty in the Southwest until February 1917. Assigned to patrol the border area, their only hostile encounter came when their football team defeated the 8th Artillery for the all-Army football championship. Soon, however, their country called on them to play a far more deadly game.

World War I

No sooner did the 32nd regiment return from Texas than orders were issued to prepare for war in Europe. Since 1914, a bloody, seemingly endless conflict consumed the men and resources of nearly every European country while the United States did its best to remain neutral. Finally, in 1917, Germany's introduction of unrestricted submarine warfare led to the sinking of several U.S. merchant ships, and President Wilson called upon Congress for a declaration of war.

With only a small, ill-trained and poorly equipped army, the United States relied on guard units to fill out its troop commitment. Redesignated the 126th Infantry Regiment, 32nd "Red Arrow" Division the Michigan National Guard reported first to Waco, Texas, and from there shipped out to the French city of Brest in February 1918. Colonel Joseph Westledge of Kalamazoo commanded the regiment, and Major Earl R. Stewart led the Grand Rapids Battalion.

For the next 10 months, the Michigan troops found themselves mired in trench warfare. Participating in four campaigns, the 126th regiment earned the nickname "Les Terribles" from its German foe, and received France's highest decoration, the Croix de Guerre (cross of war) with Palm. When war ended on November 11, 1918, the regiment reported losses of 562 dead and 2,430 wounded or gassed. Among the dead was Colonel Westnedge. The Grand Rapids Battalion returned home in June 1919.

Between Two Wars

Following World War I, the Grand Rapids Guard returned to the peacetime routine it had begun before the Civil War. In addition to weekly drill meetings at the armory, each summer guardsmen reported to Grayling for two weeks of drill, marksmanship, and combat training.

With its large drill floor, pool, bowling alley, and reading rooms, the armory was a center for community social activity, and community leaders spoke often of the guard's importance to the community. More and more, the unit's history was receiving the recognition it deserved. In 1921, the colors carried by the 32nd regiment from the Spanish-American War through World War I, were retired and placed in the state capital in Lansing, and the 126th received a new heraldic insignia from the U.S. War Department to illustrate its history. Containing a white shield to represent the infantry, a blue cross to memorialize its Civil War service, and four red fleur-de-lis to symbolize the four World War I engagements, it bears the motto *Courage Sans Peur* (Courage Without Fear). The crest is still worn today.

One of the most significant organizational changes in the Grand Rapids Guards' history came in 1933. State guard units around the country became part of a newly formed National Guard established as a reserve component of the United States Army. Individual units remained under the command of the governors of their respective states, but they could be called into national service by the president.

The economic upheaval of the 1930s brought labor unrest to Michigan. In 1937 automobile workers in Flint staged a sit-down strike, refusing to leave their factory until their union was recognized. Governor Frank Murphy called upon the guard to maintain order, and for 38 days in January and February, the regiment patrolled the area to prevent violence by either strikers or owners.

World War II

In 1940, with war spreading across Europe, the 126th Infantry regiment was among the first guard units to be called up to serve the nation. Commanded by Colonel William

Haze, the 126th Infantry joined the 32nd Division and went to Louisiana to train. When war was declared a year later following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the 32nd was immediately placed on active duty. Initially ticketed for Europe, the unit saw its orders change at the last minute, and in April 1942, the men left for Adelaide, Australia. A summer of jungle training followed, and then, on September 12, 1942, the 126th joined Australian troops in a four-month-long battle to control the southern half of New Guinea. Landing at Port Moresby, the Grand Rapids Guard began a 42-day, 125-mile march through the jungle to the village of Buna, engaging the Japanese almost constantly along the way. The Red Arrow Division's mission marked the beginning of the Allies' victorious "island hopping" campaign to retake the Pacific.

Back in action in 1944 after a long reorganization in Australia, the unit participated in several amphibious landings before rejoining the 32nd Division for a landing on Leyte in the Philippines. December 1945 found the guardsmen fighting for 36 continuous days before securing the island. Private First Class Dirk J. Vlug of Grand Rapids earned the Medal of Honor for his heroic action on Leyte. The 126th ended its Pacific service with nearly three months of "mopping up" duty on the island of Luzon.

By the time the Japanese formally surrendered on September 2, 1945, bringing World War II to a close, the 126th Infantry Regiment claimed several distinctions for its long, hard Pacific duty. It had served 654 days of combat time, the most of any U.S. regiment in history, fought the first ground offensive with the Japanese, made the first beachhead landing on New Guinea, and was the first unit to be airborne into combat.

Following a short tour of occupation duty, the 126th regiment was inactivated and sent home in February 1946.

The Post-War Era

In the years following World War II, the Grand Rapids Guard continued its dual mission: maintaining readiness as a reserve unit while helping to preserve order and responding to emergencies. Reorganized as part of the 46th "Iron Fist" Division, the 126th enjoyed the singular distinction of being the only regiment in the country with three Medal of Honor winners on its rolls: Dirk Vlug, Francis J. Pierce and John Sjogren.

In 1959, the Army dropped its regimental system, splitting the 126th into 1st and 2nd Battle Groups, 126th Infantry. Four years later a second reorganization left the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 2nd Brigade and the 46th Division Band headquartered in Grand Rapids.

Civil unrest spilled across the nation in the late 1960s presenting new challenges to guard units called upon to restore order. The 3rd Battalion reported to Benton Harbor for four nights in September 1966. The next year, President Johnson federalized the entire Grand Rapids Guard for two weeks in July to restore order in riot-torn Detroit. Again for a week

in April 1968, the guard reported to Detroit to prevent violence in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination.

In 1974, women joined the Grand Rapids Guard for the first time. Since that time, they have participated in all training activities and maneuvers.

With the end of the Cold War, the local National Guard unit was nearly eliminated. Today, the 3rd Battalion, 126th Infantry, remains in Grand Rapids performing a variety of peacetime functions. In 1995 a platoon of 126 soldiers participated in a joint training exercise with recently formed Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian forces. That same year, the 3rd Battalion deployed to Panama for the Grand Rapids Guard's first jungle warfare training since World War II. In 1996, the Grand Rapids Guard spent two weeks in Atlanta, providing security for the Olympic games. Other civic service and military training are sure to follow, continuing a Grand Rapids Guard tradition that has grown and changed with the needs of community.