Fort Snelling hosted one of 16 officer training camps established at onset of World War I

By Todd Adler

Todd Adler is an independent researcher and historian with a special interest of Fort Snelling. He is on the board of directors of the Fort Snelling Foundation and Friends of Fort Snelling.

When the United States joined WWI in April, 1917, the U.S. Army had just 200,000 personnel. In comparison, Italy had 5.6 million men under arms, France and Great Britain over 8 million, and Germany 11 million. Clearly, the U.S. had catching up to do. In order to train the massive number of men needed to fight, the army also needed to recruit and train a new batch of officers to lead them. Someone had to show new recruits how to hold a rifle, flank a machine gun position, and peel a potato.

Sixteen training camps for officers were set up across the country and one site selected was Fort Snelling. Six thousand men applied for the two Officer Training Camps at Fort Snelling, 4,000 were accepted, and only about 2,500 ultimately got commissions. The rest were deemed deficient in some way, either because they didn’t measure up to the army’s standards or because the vast number of candidates had to be culled. Many were dropped from the program through no serious fault of their own, but because there were too many applicants.

Candidates had to submit evidence and testimonials attesting to their character, loyalty, education, and business experience. The applications were then reviewed and divided into A grade and B grade. Even after winnowing out a lot of candidates, there were still too many in the A grade category for the camp. Candidates came from all over Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and enlisted men from the regular army who showed aptitude to become an officer. They were trained in infantry, artillery, and engineer skills in courses lasting three months. The career officers derided them as “Ninety Day Wonders” because they didn’t have the depth of experience of an officer who had been in the

The newly built Cantonment Area consisted of wooden barracks. Most candidates stayed here, but some were housed in the post’s older brick barracks and some in squad tents. (Adler Collection)
army for decades. Many were washed out of the program, but those who passed became the backbone of the new, larger army, ready to head Over There to fight for freedom and democracy.

**Camp #1**

The first training camp got underway on May 11, 1917. Candidates showed up at Fort Snelling with a postcard in hand telling them when and where to appear. They were marked off on a list, assigned to a company, and sent off to find their instructor. The instructor added them to his list and then sent them in groups to the hospital for a thorough physical examination. If they passed the exam, candidates were returned to their company where they were assigned to a squad based on their height, then marched off to the quartermaster’s department for a uniform and equipment. The rest of the day was spent cleaning cosmoline (a dense, wax-like rust inhibitor) from their rifles and squaring away their equipment.

Most of the men had arrived over the first several days, so Sunday, May 13, they were marched down to the Post Exchange and lined up in the gymnasium for inoculations. Disease was a big problem for the army during the Spanish-American War in 1898, so it was decided that all recruits would get a full slate of shots, usually administered on weekends so the men would have a chance to recover from the effects of the vaccines. It was a warm day and the gymnasium was hot and stuffy with spring temperatures climbing in to the upper 60s. Coupled with the medicinal smells, several men passed out from the heat and odors, much to the delight of their compatriots.

From there, drill and training started in earnest. Reveille sounded at 5:15 every morning and candidates were kept on the go until lights out at 11 PM. Thirty minutes of physical activity was followed by breakfast and then drill for the rest of the morning. The afternoon was spent in instruction and the evenings in studying the next day’s material. Saturday morning, everyone turned out for inspection and, if they passed, candidates were given leave for the remainder of the weekend. Many spent their precious few off hours studying as competition was fierce for the few candidate slots and everyone wanted to be one of the chosen. Three candidates rented a hotel room in Minneapolis one weekend and spread maps out on the floor as they worked out tactical problems. They also bought beers to drink while they studied, which was strictly against the rules. An officer wandered by the open door of their room, saw the empty bottles on the dresser, and promptly put them under arrest and reported them to the commanding general. They were in big trouble! Fortunately for them, they were allowed to stay in the camp and were just given a public reprimand as punishment. The U.S. Army wasn’t playing around!

The first five weeks of instruction put the students in ever larger groups, giving each person a chance to show what he knew and drill the other candidates in the Manual of Arms. The progression went from squads to platoons to companies, to battalions, each step advancing to larger and more complex formations. Study also included caring for and firing a rifle, signal codes and flags, and posture. You need to have a proper bearing if you’re going to be an officer in the military!

The next eight weeks of the camp consisted of specialized training based on branch of service. The coastal artillery people were sent off to Virginia for more training and the engineers to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The artillerymen were issued cannons from the First Minnesota Field Artillery and practiced firing solutions sans live shot as there wasn’t an artillery range at Fort Snelling. The cavalrymen finished up the program as infantry because there weren’t any horses for them.
Several days a week were devoted to marches, which developed into mock battles against a fictitious enemy. The men deployed in skirmish lines, sent out scouts, and dug into defensive positions against stiff resistance from their invisible enemy. There were several Battles of Pilot Knob across the river from the fort. The men were ferried across (the Mendota Bridge wasn’t built until 1926) and they fought uphill in the heat, humidity, and bugs of a steamy Minnesota summer.

Towards the end of this phase of the training, the men marched down to Bloomington, which was then a rural community of just over 1000 people. The next day they “fought” their way back to the fort, digging in against a tough enemy just southwest of the post along Bloomington Road. This heralded the next phase of the training, switching from open or skirmish warfare to trench warfare training. They learned how to dig in, assault and defend a trench line, and mount patrols into no-man’s land, among other exercises. On August 9 and 10 they held their final training exercise, a mock battle assaulting imaginary enemy trenches in waves while the artillery behind them fired blanks and some men set off smoke bombs and dynamite. Others were designated to be casualties and take hits on the way across the fields. They weren’t happy about it as they wanted to participate in the battle—that is until they got a sip of brandy from the medical personnel who came to carry them off the field.

The following Monday, August 13, Washington telegraphed the fort’s personnel with the list of candidates who had made the grade. There were 1551 commissions granted, of which roughly one third were second lieutenants, two hundred first lieutenants, slightly fewer captains, and two majors. By the evening of August 15, everyone was on their way to their new assignments and the barracks were deserted.

**Camp #2**

The second Officers Training Camp started hard on the heels of the first. Postcards telling the candidates to report on August 27 were mailed out August 20. Operations began in earnest on the 28th with soldiers filling out a questionnaire on their abilities, physical characteristics, and preference for infantry, field artillery, or coastal artillery. As soon as they completed the paperwork, they were assigned to a training company and marched off to their barracks and then to the quartermaster to draw a uniform and equipment.

If you’ve ever lived in Minnesota, you know we have two seasons in this state: “Winter’s Coming” and “It’s Here.” Even though it was balmy 78° F when the camp started, instructors were cognizant that snow was just around the corner. Consequently, training was switched around and moved up. Less emphasis was placed on skirmish warfare and more on trench tactics, such as assaulting and defending a trench, grenade throwing, and bayonet drill. A French officer, Captain Cheffaud, arrived at Fort Snelling to help construction of more trenches. With his help, the students expanded the original trench line and built a second one facing it so half the students could man each line. One played defense while the other offense.

Even with the schedule switched around, overnight trench training had to be suspended from mid-October till late November because it was too cold at night. The
staff finally went ahead with the skirmish anyway on November 22 and that battle served as the graduation exercise for the class.

Between the first and second camps, the artillery pieces had been shipped overseas for use in the war, leaving class #2 with no actual artillery to drill with. They made do with a rifle mounted on a plank, the candidates standing in for horses and a string tied to the rifle’s trigger serving as a lanyard. Men would pull their makeshift artillery piece into place, wheel it around to face the proper direction, sight it in, and fire off a blank in lieu of a shell.

At the end of the mock battle the men were granted their commissions, of which just 971 were issued out of the 1500 who started the camp. The men who were assigned to the Signal Corps were given their commissions a couple of days early so they could leave the camp in secrecy and head overseas. By November 27, all the newly minted officers had left Fort Snelling and the 36th Infantry Regiment moved into the barracks.

Another chapter in Fort Snelling’s storied history drew to a close.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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**Volunteer Voices: Meet Diane Devere**

Volunteers are indispensable to the museum’s work. In their own words here’s how they are making good things happen at the Minnesota military Museum.

Diane lives in Brainerd and has been volunteering at the museum for four years. One of the museum’s most dedicated volunteers, she puts in hundreds of hours each year.

**On getting involved:** “I decided to volunteer after reading an interview in the Brainerd newspaper with Dr. Jon van der Hagen about his volunteer work at the museum. The article also stated that they were looking for volunteers to help out at the museum and included the web address. I checked out the website and volunteered to transcribe [type out] the veteran oral history tapes.”

**Museum projects:** “I continue to transcribe the oral histories and veterans’ stories as they become available. I also work in the library where I and several other really wonderful volunteers are getting all the books into a database in preparation for the library’s opening as a lending library.”

**What she likes most:** “The museum staff and volunteers and the people from Camp Ripley who work with us have been great. It has been gratifying to work with the museum to honor our Minnesota veterans in even a small way.”
CURATOR’S CORNER
By Doug Thompson

With the museum’s expanded summer hours and nice weather we’ve started to improve some of our outdoor displays, including the restoration and painting of several vehicles that were in need of some TLC! One that we’re particularly excited about is the cosmetic restoration of our combat veteran M4A3E2 “Jumbo” Sherman tank. This is one of only a handful of this model of Sherman tank to still exist, out of a total of 254 made during WW2. The CSMS shop at Camp Ripley has been doing a fantastic job of removing all the post-war modifications to the tank, and adding WW2 period correct details, some of which had to be made from scratch. It will be painted a correct shade of olive drab and have authentic markings added, and with any luck and time permitting in the CSMS shop’s busy schedule, it will be back in front of the museum by the time you read this newsletter.

Our volunteers continue to provide sterling service to the museum. From helping to build new exhibits, restoring artifacts, painting, installing new storage shelving, and any number of necessary tasks that are needed to keep this place running like a clock, they can do it ALL! Thanks for all the hard, dedicated work. We appreciate you!

The overwhelming success of our educational Traveling Trunk program has been gratifying to everyone who invested time and effort into getting it up and running. While we currently have six trunks, we’d like to add more to the inventory to keep the wait times to a minimum for organizations that want to utilize them. We’d eventually like to have at least 15 trunks available for loan. Would you consider making a special donation to purchase the required materials for more?

We are continuing to actively seek out artifacts, photographs, and stories from Minnesotan’s service in the Middle East. If you served there, now is the time to write about your experiences and to preserve your thoughts for future generations of people who want to know what your service to our country during those times was like! It’s YOUR history . . . help US to preserve it!

OUT OF THE ARCHIVES
By Ryan Welle

Work in the archives continues to move along with new projects underway. One such project is organizing space in the archives so visitors can better use the collections we have. There have already been some use of this new space and the feedback is very positive. If you would like to access some of the collections within the archives, feel free to stop by or set up an appointment to schedule a time.

Another project underway is being worked on by our dedicated intern for the summer, Kyle. He is busy looking through the large collection of veteran files we have at the museum and creating an index of the materials in each file. This will greatly help as we move forward with processing these files, making them easier to use for exhibits or for personal research. The work that Kyle has been doing for us this summer has been of real value, and we cannot thank him enough.

We have also started creating an index of veterans named in the muster rolls from the Civil War through WWII. This will greatly help when looking for information on a specific veteran and should be useful for genealogical research. The project requires a significant amount of data entry and careful transcription. If you would like to become involved in the project as a volunteer, please let me know at rwelle@mnmilitarymuseum.org.

Another ongoing project we have been working on is collecting and sharing stories for Minnesota veterans through our Veteran’s Registry. I have been in contact with several other groups that have participated in similar projects, and working to collaborate with local historical institutions and veterans groups. If you would like to add to this project by sharing your story, or that of someone else you know, it can be done from our website by clicking on the link at the top of the home page.

DIRECTOR’S UPDATE

As this issue went to press, Randal Dietrich was named as our new Executive Director, effective Aug. 1.
Meet our summer intern: Kyle Imdieke

The museum has enjoyed the services of an intern or two every summer for the past several years. This summer, Kyle Imdieke fills those shoes. Kyle, who grew up in Sauk Centre and currently lives in St. Cloud, graduated in May from St. Cloud State University with a BA in history. Internships are a win-win: the intern gets invaluable hands-on learning experience while the museum gets fresh help during the busy summer months.

As an intern, Kyle works closely with archivist Ryan Welle and curator Doug Thompson. In the archives, he has been inventorying 34th Division World War II veterans’ files so they can become more accessible to the public (“There are some really interesting stories in there!” he says). He also helps individuals seeking information: “A couple of weeks ago, I spent a day assisting an historian, Donald Caldwell, who is writing a book on the Provisional Tank Group in the Philippines. He came up from Texas to do research on the 194th Tank Battalion. That was a great experience.”

On the curatorial side, he has taken responsibility for the Featured Veteran exhibit. This involves identifying a Minnesota veteran, creating a temporary exhibit about that person, and posting his or her story on our website. The current vet is Fr. Stephen Wagman, who grew up in Virginia, MN and became an army chaplain. Wagman earned the nickname “Flying Padre” during the Vietnam War (come to the museum to see the exhibit or visit mnmilitarymuseum.org). Kyle also worked on the new Global War on Terror exhibit.

When he’s not at the museum, Kyle enjoys reading and is teaching himself to play the guitar. He and his fiancée, Abbi, have also taken up hiking. As for the internship, he’s been pleased with the experience: “Overall, this has been an outstanding opportunity,” he states. “I learn something new every day, whether that’s a skill, or aspect of museum careers, or a new story to tell.” He plans to return to SCSU in the fall to pursue an MA in public history. When he finishes, he says a career with a Minnesota museum or historic site would suit him just fine.
DONOR HONOR ROLL, April to June, 2017

Memorials
Given by:
194th Tank Regiment
Charley & Norma Extrand
Kathy Hyatt
Doug Bekke
Richard and Betty Hayes
Richard and Betty Hayes
Richard and Betty Hayes
Richard and Betty Hayes
Richard and Betty Hayes
Winter Operations Inst.
Winter Operations Inst.
Winter Operations Inst.
Raymond H. Lunde
James Nygaard
In Memory of:
John Handeland
John Handeland
John Handeland
Jim Carroll
John A. Rehkamp
Dwayne Peterson
Jerry Lamont
Rita Faust
COL Duane Marholz
1SG Mike Granquist
SSG Harold Goblish
SFC Roger Woods
LTC Mike McCarthy
Winter Operations Inst.

SPOTLIGHTED
RECENT
DONATIONS

Some amazing things come out of garden sheds!
This recently acquired donation came to the museum last month from Gordon Bradbury in Ottertail, MN. What is it, you might ask? It’s a World War Two US stretcher cart. Officially a “Carrier, Field, Collapsible,” it was designed to haul a stretcher over relatively even terrain, allowing for the rapid movement of wounded personnel to an aid station. It was easy for one man to operate, avoiding the need for up to four soldiers to have to carry a wounded man out of harm’s way.

It’s in remarkably good condition, and after we do some minor restoration on it we hope to soon have it on display in one of the vehicle display buildings.

Renewing Members
Ronald Andreen • Shirley Arvidson • Roger Avery • Louis Bode • James Chaffee • Daniel Conlon • Daniel Ewer • Margaret Fletcher • Bob Heidelberger • Marvin Hey • Donald Jensen • Earl Jensen • Al Kabus • Larry Kimball • James Kuhn • Jean McDonald • Ron Miller • Harry Moore • Richard Morey • John Nickolay • Herb Schaper • Harry Sieben • Kyle Ward

New Members
Jon Walsh

American Legion
Post 617, Eagle Lake • Post 381 Auxiliary, Eden Valley • Post 202, Hackensack • Post 313, Swanville •

VFW
Post 4210, Forest Lake • Post 5039, Morris •

Financial Donations
Amazon Smile Foundation • Philip Andrews • Bernick’s Pepsi • James Chaffee • Fraternal Order of Eagles #3208, Minneapolis • Janice Glass • Timothy Knipp • Melanie McCoy • Larry Osvald • St. Cloud Lions Club • St. Gabriel’s Hospital • Swanville Lions Club •

Artifact Donation
Estate of Bernadette C. Anderson • Elizabeth Baklaich • Steve Baklaich • Tom Chial • Barbara Gaasedelen • James Gaasedelen • Jon Gaasedelen • Jim Hovda • Roger Iverson • Tom and Barb James • Clarence W. Jensen • Dean & Elaine Jensen • Karen Krenik • Brian Linde • James Murphy • Ronald Niewohner • Terry W. Palmer • Greg Pelletier • Mike Rinowski • Jan Rothanburg • Mary Saboe • DeWayne Schwanke • Richard Sorenson • Pat Spinosa • Jon Van der Hagen • John & Sherri Woodley
Happy 40th birthday to us!

The museum is forty years old this summer. Its parent organization, the Military Historical Society of Minnesota, was incorporated in 1976. The museum opened to the public in June 1977. Initially housed in Camp Ripley’s former Servicemen’s Club, the museum moved in 1987 into its present building, a former regimental headquarters that had been expanded and renovated expressly to house the museum. Since then, we’ve added several adjacent buildings. Those old enough to remember the original museum will surely agree to this: we’ve come a long way!