

Ellard A. Walsh (1887-1975) – “Mr. National Guard”

*Today’s National Guard owes much to this tenacious
Minnesota general*

By Jack K. Johnson

It’s “a damn lie.” His Irish ire was up and Major General Ellard A. Walsh was in no mood to mince words. As president of the organization looking after the interests of the National Guard, Walsh told a *Washington Post* reporter in January 1957 *exactly* what he thought of the accusation by Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson that men who enlisted in the National Guard were draft dodgers.¹ It was front page news. Not even the Secretary of Defense could insult with impunity the organization that Walsh had so long championed.

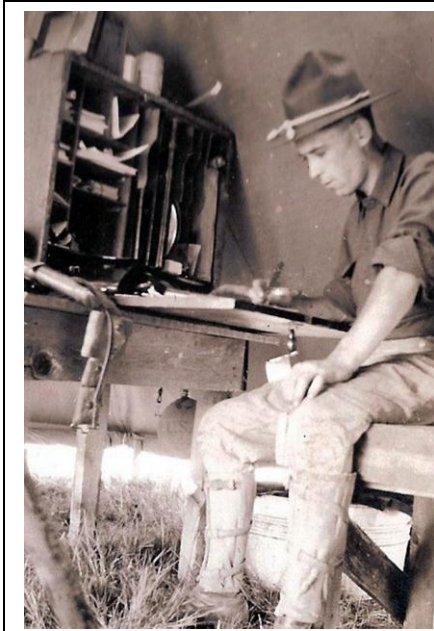


Gregarious and combative, with a flair for organization that few individuals could match, Ellard Walsh of Minnesota had a profound impact on the modern National Guard. He was Minnesota’s Adjutant General for nearly 25 years (1925-49), commanded the 34th Infantry Division when it entered federal service in February 1941, and led the Washington-based National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS) from 1943-1957, building it into a powerful political force on Capitol Hill. NGAUS was the focal point for restoring the National Guard to its rightful place following World War Two.

Born in Ontario on October 3, 1887, Walsh moved as a child with his parents to North Minneapolis. He enlisted in the First Minnesota Regiment, Minnesota National Guard, on November 7, 1905. His early years in the Guard were unremarkable, but things took a turn when he was federalized in 1916 and sent to patrol the Mexican border. By the time he

¹ Davis, Jan 29, 1957, A1.

returned home in March 1917, he had become a first sergeant, and when he was federalized



Walsh while on field training in 1914. He was already showing a flair for administration.

again just two weeks later—this time for World War One—he was commissioned a Second Lieutenant with the 135th Infantry. That summer he headed for training at Camp Cody, New Mexico, with the newly formed 34th Infantry Division, but he didn't ship to France until October 1918, a month before the war ended and too late to see action.

After the war, he rejoined the Minnesota National Guard and quickly moved up in rank as the Guard rebuilt itself. Savvy and energetic, Walsh also had a knack for remembering names and faces. People within the Guard's hierarchy took notice, and in 1921 he was offered a job on the staff as Assistant Adjutant General, along with a

promotion to Lt. Colonel. Walsh took the offer. A few years later he became Chief of Staff for the 34th Division, was promoted to Colonel, and in 1925 assumed the role of Acting Adjutant General for the ailing AG, Walter F. Rhinow. In 1927 Walsh became the full-fledged AG, earning his first star. He had clearly found a niche in life: his rise from First Sergeant to Brigadier General took ten years.

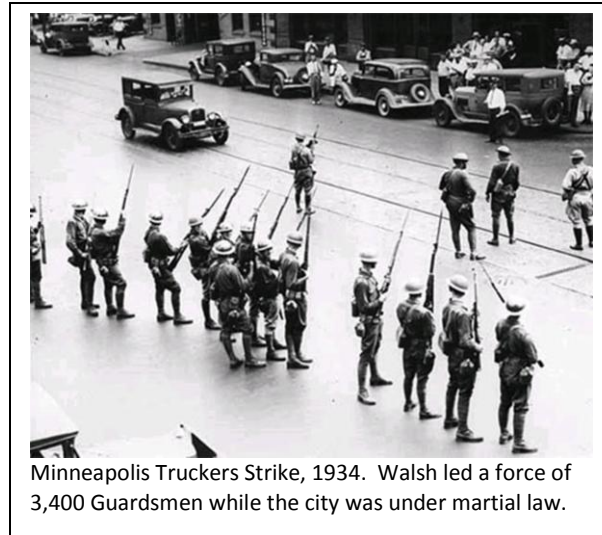
Creating a replacement for Camp Lakeview, Minnesota's outmoded National Guard training camp in Lake City, was Walsh's top priority when he became Adjutant General. He discreetly scouted possibilities throughout the state and played his cards carefully. When he found what he was looking for, aided by state Senator Christian Rosenmeier of Little Falls, Walsh convinced the legislature and governor to acquire a 12,000 acre tract along the west bank of the Mississippi River north of Little Falls. By coincidence, the land incorporated the remains of Fort Ripley, a frontier army garrison from 1849-1877, and Camp Ripley was born, taking its name from the old fort. Construction began immediately and the first troops used the new post in 1931. By the

early 1940s, the camp was able to accommodate up to 10,000 troops at one time, and by the early 1960s, it had incrementally grown to its present configuration of 53,000 acres.

One of Walsh's toughest assignments in the 1930s came during the 1934 Truckers' Strike in Minneapolis. Fights that spring and summer

between striking workers and sympathizers on one side, and business interests on the other side supported by the police and strong arm Citizen's Alliance "militias," had devolved into chaos with four dead and hundreds injured.

Governor Floyd B. Olson placed the city under martial law on July 26, declaring it to be in a state of insurrection. Three thousand four hundred Guardsmen were immediately activated and put under the direct command of



Adjutant General Walsh. It was a breach of military custom because Walsh was a staff officer, not a line officer, but Walsh was the man Olson most trusted. Working in concert with the Governor, Walsh moved decisively to restore order in the streets and protect citizens on both sides. Military zones and checkpoints were set up; the strike headquarters was shut down and its top leaders confined for a few days until tempers cooled; a curfew was imposed on businesses; assemblies without military authorization were prohibited; only vehicles with military permits were allowed into certain areas; and troops were assigned to protect shipments of essential goods, such as food and fuel, into city markets. Both sides grumbled, complaining that Walsh was overreaching his authority, but Walsh's firm actions brought an immediate end to violent confrontations and set the stage for federal mediators who secured an agreement on August 21, ending Walsh's month-long tenure as the de-facto head of Minneapolis.

As the decade drew to a close, the nation could not ignore the wars being waged in both Asia and Europe. The United States had allowed its peacetime military to languish in the years after World War One. Isolationist sentiment was strong and government purse strings were tight. Nevertheless, the outbreak of war in Europe on September 1, 1939, spurred rapid improvements to



Walsh at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, while commanding the 34th Infantry Division, 1941.

the country's military preparedness. Within a year, America's Armed Forces were significantly larger, better organized and trained, and better equipped. In August 1940 Congress authorized the president to order the National Guard and Reserves to active duty for twelve months of precautionary training, and, shortly thereafter, authorized the nation's first peacetime draft.

The 34th Infantry Division, made up of Guardsmen from Minnesota, Iowa, and the Dakotas, was federalized on February 10, 1941. Walsh had assumed command of the division eight months earlier while continuing to serve as

Adjutant General. With it came his promotion to Major General. Upon federalization, he went with his troops to Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, but his time with the division was cut short. Chronic ulcers hemorrhaged in August, preventing him from participating in Corps training maneuvers. He returned to Minnesota for a six-week stay at the Mayo Clinic, but the Army's doctors were adamant that he should not return to field command. Walsh could transfer to a desk job in the Army—General George Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, personally urged him to do so—but Walsh concluded that he could do more for the war effort and the country as Adjutant General of the State of Minnesota. It was a prescient decision.

Walsh's request to be relieved from active duty was approved, effective October 31, 1941. He returned to his St. Paul office in the state Capitol building and dove into the tasks at hand, such as creating a State Defense Force to replace National Guard units now in federal service. He also attended to issues on a national level. The politics of the Guard had always held his keen attention and, as sitting president of the Adjutant Generals Association and previous president (1928-30) of the National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS), Walsh had become part of a small, inner-circle of influential leaders in the Guard. The group also included Milton Reckford, Adjutant General of Maryland, and Edward Martin, Adjutant General and soon-to-be Governor of Pennsylvania. The ever-present tension between Army regulars and the Guard had taken a critical turn in early 1943. Lieutenant General Leslie

McNair, Commanding General of Army Ground Forces² and other powerful members of the General Staff were laying the groundwork for a plan to essentially kill the Guard as a viable military force after the war. The threat was real.

At an emergency meeting of NGAUS that April, Walsh was once again offered the mantle of president—except this time he was charged to do nothing less than save the post-war Guard. He had little to work with. Nearly all the Guard’s standing leadership was fully engaged fighting the war. The association itself had no office or staff, little money, and scant organization. But the National Guard did enjoy broad public support. It had the Militia Clause of the Constitution. It had good relations with most elected officials. And it had Walsh. Walsh tackled the job with characteristic vigor, splitting his time between NGAUS in Washington and his Adjutant General duties in St. Paul. Using personal funds, he set up headquarters in downtown Washington, hired a two-person staff, and went to work garnering reinforcement for his message. Walsh liked the interplay of high stakes politics. He was not afraid of powerful bullies, and he knew how and when to “call a spade a spade, and not a gardening instrument.”³

Challenges to the Guard’s future well-being seemed to be coming from all sides. There was the Wadsworth-Gurney Bill, a congressional initiative for post-war Universal Military Training (UMT) that could threaten the Guard’s status as the nation’s principal reserve force. It had a counterpart, the May Bill, which looked even more threatening. There was the Select Committee on Post-War Military Policy (the Woodrum Committee), which had the look of a loose cannon. There were newspaper and magazine articles that sometimes cast the National Guard in an unflattering light. When a Special Planning Division (a War Department planning staff headed by Brigadier General William F. Tompkins) released a draft document entitled “Outline of the Post-War Military Establishment” in January 1944, the Guard was conspicuously absent from its pages. Not only that, no representative of the Guard had been included on Tompkins’s staff. McNair, quickly responding to the draft document, laid his cards right on the table and recommended, “That the National Guard be dispensed with as a component of the

² General McNair, a West Pointer whose distain for the Guard was well known, was also a Minnesotan. He grew up in Verndale.

³ Hill, 343.

Army.”⁴ Walsh counterattacked. He referred to his opponents as caste-serving “Regular Army Samurai.” He pointed out that Section 5 of the National Defense Act of 1933 specified that any proposal to modify the Guard’s role required study by a panel composed of regular Army *and* Guard officers. He wrote a lengthy, detailed treatise on the capabilities of the Guard—along with a razor sharp rebuttal of those who would dismantle it—and he began to round up backing from influential friends of the Guard on Capitol Hill, in the American Legion and VFW, and within the military itself.

As it turned out, forces had already been at work within the War Department—albeit more quietly—to ensure the Guard’s future. Brigadier General John McAuley Palmer, U.S. Army Retired, had been recalled to active duty to conduct research and serve as an advisor to General Marshall on civilian and military personnel issues. Palmer, who was sympathetic to the Guard, reminded Marshall about Section 5. It meant, in effect, that the exclusion of a Guard representative on Tompkins’s staff was illegal. Moreover, both men understood the political brouhaha that would surely follow any serious attempt to cut the Guard out of post-war Army plans. For his part, Marshall had a good grasp of the shortcomings and strengths of the Guard. He appreciated the Guard’s role in American life, not to mention the substantial contribution citizen-soldiers were currently making to the war, and he directed that the Guard immediately have a seat at the table in any planning that affected the post-war Guard.

As a result, the Special Planning Division became a forum for Guard leaders and Army staff to address their concerns.⁵ In August 1944 it issued a circular that set forth principles favoring a mix of professional soldiers and citizen-soldiers in post-war national defense. Marshall approved it and ordered the group to then hammer out a workable plan of action. Walsh became a critical player in the negotiations, aided immeasurably by General Reckford, who had returned to Washington from duty overseas as the European Theater’s Provost Marshall. By war’s end, a War Department directive spelled out the Guard’s mission, purpose,

⁴ McNair, 199.

⁵ NGAUS’s role as a first-line defender of the Guard was crucial during the war because the National Guard Bureau, a branch of the War Department charged with representing Guard interests, had been gutted in 1942. Converted to little more than a caretaking detachment for Guard records, reports, and disbursement vouchers, it no longer had ready access to high levels in the Army’s chain of command.

and force structure. The National Guard would remain as the country's principal reserve force—a real partner in national defense—while retaining its dual state/federal role.

The Guard had been integral to America's victory in World War Two, in spite of accusations from some sources that it was ill-prepared in the conflict's early stages. The fact was that without the ready, standing force it provided at the outset, the nation could not have launched military initiatives so quickly after Pearl Harbor. Citizen soldiers bore their full share of combat. With blood and sacrifice, they served ably and honorably, in virtually every major action, in all theaters of operation.

Walsh stayed on as NGAUS president after the war, playing a key role in gaining approval for a larger post-war Guard to be organized into 27 divisions, 21 regimental combat teams, and hundreds of separate companies and battalions. Among seven new divisions to be organized was the 47th "Viking" Division, with headquarters in St. Paul. Working as a team, Walsh and Reckford pressed tirelessly for more federal funds without sacrificing the Guard's unique autonomy as a state force. It was always a delicate balancing act, involving high stakes and trade-offs at both state and federal levels, but real success came in 1948 when the draft law expired and Guard enlistments took a nosedive. Intense lobbying brought a million dollar allotment from Congress to beef up Guard recruitment. There were other momentous successes that year as well: retirement pay for long-serving Guardsmen; active duty pay equal to that of one's Regular counterparts; a right to attend the most advanced military education programs; and derailment in Congress of a chief proposal of the Gray Board⁶ for a national militia and merger of the National Guard and Reserves into the Regulars.

Other postwar issues also consumed attention: a new Air National Guard to parallel the Army National Guard; reorganization of the National Guard Bureau; a new office and expanded staff for NGAUS; publication of a monthly magazine to



⁶ A study group appointed by the Secretary of Defense and headed by Assistant Secretary of the Army Gordon Gray.

serve as a tool for public relations and improved communication with Guard officers on a national level; and ceaseless maneuvering for resources and policies favorable to the Guard.

As mandated by law, Walsh retired as Minnesota's Adjutant General on his 62nd birthday, October 3, 1949. He did so with mixed emotions because he had held the post for 22 years (24 if you counted his two years as Acting AG), but it freed him to give full attention to his work as president of NGAUS. A signature accomplishment came the following year when the federal government agreed to assume most of the construction and maintenance costs for armories.⁷ Then came battles over basic training requirements, how the Guard was activated and deployed during the Korean War, and over renewed attempts by the Department of Defense to strip the Guard of its federal role and make it into a solely homeland defense force—all against the complicated backdrop of Cold War politics and global obligations.



With former President Truman at the 1959 dedication of NGAUS's first National Guard Memorial Building in Washington, DC. Walsh was instrumental in getting it built.

Walsh's second retirement came in October 1957 when he stepped down as NGAUS president. He had been its president for 14 consecutive, pivotal years. Before departing, he launched a drive to build a permanent home for NGAUS, a goal realized two years later with the dedication of an imposing National Guard Memorial Building at One Massachusetts Avenue in Washington, DC.⁸

Returning to Minnesota, he pursued his hobby of gardening, kept in touch with old colleagues, and eventually purchased a house in Stillwater that was next door to his daughter and two grandsons. He died August 29, 1975, about a month short of his 88th birthday, and was laid to rest in Camp Ripley's Pioneer Cemetery. Ironically, he probably outlived the doctors who insisted in 1941 that Walsh's health disqualified him for field command.

⁷ Years later, Walsh stated that his two most significant feats as a lobbyist were the 1950 Armory Construction Act and, in 1948, securing federal retirement pay for the Guard.

⁸ The building has since been replaced by a much larger structure, but its auditorium, the "Walsh-Reckford Hall of States," stands as a permanent tribute to the invaluable work of both men on behalf of the National Guard.

Looking back, it would be misleading to conclude that General Walsh was personally responsible for “saving the National Guard” during a critical time in its history. Walsh took pride in his accomplishments, but he would have been first to give credit where it was due: namely, a very long list of people who collectively labored toward that end—along with countless thousands of ordinary citizen-soldiers and airmen whose service and achievements gave honor to the organization of which they were part. Nevertheless, it is a fact that Walsh provided unwavering leadership for these efforts at a time decisive to the Guard’s future. Fundamental policies and practices that today are taken for granted took shape on his watch. Without his vision, vigilance, and formidable skills, things could very well have taken a different turn for the Guard.

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