

## George E. Leach (1876 – 1959)

By Al Zdon

*George Leach was one of the Minnesota's most distinguished citizen-soldiers.*



**Major General Leach as head of the Militia Bureau, US Army, in 1931.**

George Emerson Leach was born into a military family on July 14, 1876, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Two of his great grandfathers fought in the Revolutionary War. His father fought in the Civil War. Leach himself fought in World War I in France, commanding the 151<sup>st</sup> Field Artillery Regiment in the famous 42<sup>nd</sup> “Rainbow” Division.

He later went on to become a major general, helped organize America’s first Olympic ski team, and was elected six times (serving a dozen years) as mayor of Minneapolis.

### **Family history and early years**

Leach traced his family history back to 14th century England where one of his direct ancestors, John Leach, was a surgeon for King Edward III. In the 17th century, the Leach Family emigrated to America.

George Leach’s mother, Mary, was born in Michigan in 1845, and his father, William, was born in New Hampshire in 1834. His father was orphaned at seven, but was taken in by a farm family. At age 14, William became the new school teacher in his town “because he could whip any of the boys who had run the former teacher out.” William went to the University of Vermont, and eventually ended up in Minnesota where he passed the bar exam after spending a long, cold winter teaching himself from law books in a building where he was the janitor.

In 1861, William Leach was one of the first volunteers in the famed First Minnesota Infantry Regiment and he was soon named the regiment’s adjutant. He distinguished himself for bravery at Bull Run and later served on the staffs of several Civil War generals. After the war, William Leach led an interesting civilian life. He built and owned a grain mill in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and was making a good living at the business when a dam broke and the rushing water took the mill with it. He refused to accept bankruptcy and finally paid off his existing contracts just before his death in 1903. In the meantime, he founded a newspaper, served in the Iowa

legislature, served on the Iowa Superior Court, and was mayor of Cedar Rapids. He always told his son to stay out of politics.

The elder Leach moved to Minneapolis in 1884 when George was eight years old. The young lad attended a grade school in downtown Minneapolis and getting to school each day was a slow process. "The street cars were pulled by mules," he later recalled.

Young George spent his summers working on his aunt's ranch in South Dakota. When he was 14 he was present when the Lakota living at Wounded Knee rebelled in 1890. The local settlers had barricaded themselves in town, but Leach's aunt told George to take a bull they had just purchased in town back to the farm. He drove the bull to the farm, passing farmers who were deserting their farms for the shelter of the town. Leach said he didn't arrive until just before dawn, and then slept on the kitchen floor, afraid of being killed in his bed. In the morning, he had to check on the bull, but he was terrified he would be shot as he left the house. "It was a hundred yards to the barn, and I bet I set a world's record in that 100." Later that winter, the Wounded Knee Massacre occurred and over 300 Lakota were killed by soldiers.

Leach went to Central High School in Minneapolis, but he barely graduated because he devoted most of his time to athletics. While enrolled at the University of Minnesota Law School, from which he graduated in 1897, he tried to get an appointment to West Point. He was the alternate on two occasions, but never made the final cut.

As the years went by, Leach, like his father, took on a variety of jobs. One of those was inspecting grain elevators in Minnesota and the Dakotas for an insurance company. Because there were few railroads, Leach rode his bicycle from town to town. "I didn't consider it a good day's work unless I rode my bicycle for 100 miles and climbed to the top of 40 or 50 elevators."

He became an insurance agent, and then got into the banking business in South Dakota. At first, with the land speculation and booming economy, the banking business was lucrative, and at one time Leach owned 26 quarter sections of land. Then hard times came to the prairie and Leach was forced to sell his bank and his land.

In 1902, he married Pearl Van Vorous, but the marriage took a bad turn in 1910. She moved to the Bahamas to open a tea room and never came back. The two were finally divorced in 1923, although Leach said they always stayed close friends.

### **He becomes an artilleryman in the Minnesota National Guard**

In 1905, at age 29, Leach joined Battery B of the First Minnesota Artillery, a National Guard outfit based in Minneapolis. "From then on, my whole life was wrapped up in the National Guard, and although I had to make a living on the side, it was my first love." In those days, except for a small stipend paid during one week of summer field training, the men served for no pay, and, in fact, had to chip in 25 cents a week dues just to keep the battery going. Leach moved up from second to first lieutenant his first year, and was made captain in 1908.

The battery bought a stable, but it didn't work out. "The venture of owning our own horses was not a success, and to save the battery from going into debt, Phil Brooks and I bought the stable and the horses and we started a riding school," Leach remembered. There were ups and downs in the horse business, he said, "and mostly the latter." He was eventually forced to sell the stable and farm that he owned.

In 1916, Poncho Villa was making trouble on the Mexican border. Leach was now a major in command of the Second Battalion, First Minnesota Field Artillery Regiment. The Minnesota National Guard was called up to protect the border and sent to Camp Llano Grande near the Rio Grande in south Texas. While in Texas, Leach was promoted by Minnesota Gov. J. A. Burnquist to colonel and given command of his entire regiment. After nine months in Texas, the unit was sent home in February of 1917.

### **World War One**

Leach was certain that America's entry into the Great War in Europe was imminent, and he struggled to keep the National Guard unit together, sometimes paying for their meals at a St. Paul Greek restaurant out of his own pocket. The strategy worked: when America officially entered the war in April, Leach's unit was again mobilized and quickly became the first federally recognized National Guard artillery regiment in the United States.



**Colonel Leach as commander of the 151st Field Artillery, 42nd Division, in 1918.**

The army decided to create a new national division, the 42<sup>nd</sup>, to be comprised of Guard units from 26 states and the District of Columbia. Leach's regiment was re-designated as the 151st Field Artillery and chosen as one of the division's three artillery regiments. The 42nd Division was given the nickname "Rainbow Division" because one of its staff officers, then-Major Douglas MacArthur said, its composition "stretched like a rainbow from one end of America to the other."

The first movement for the 151st was from Ft. Snelling, marching down the same road Leach's father had marched down at the start of the Civil War. Leach took 1,260 men to Camp Mills, N.Y. In October, the division left for France, and was one of the first American divisions to reach the battlefield.

In those days, every National Guard regiment had a band. As the division was preparing to embark for France on a ship called the President Lincoln, Col. Leach was told by the army that he could not take his band instruments. Leach made a secret agreement with the captain of the ship to stow away the instruments, and they arrived with the regiment in France. "The result was that for months we had the only US Army band in France."

World War I soldiers were instructed not to keep diaries, lest they fall into the hands of the enemy, but once again Leach ignored the order and kept a thorough diary of his war experience. He said he was convinced by the experience of his father, who did not keep a diary and regretted it, that the men under his command deserved a history of their service. The diary has over 500 entries, and they tell a detailed story of the 151st and the Rainbow Division over the 19 months they spent overseas.

After spending several weeks in France, the unit finally got its artillery pieces, French 75mm field guns, M1897—aka French 75s—and on Nov. 18<sup>th</sup> began training with them at an old French artillery camp southeast of Renne. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, a gun blew up and killed two men. “The men killed were blown to pieces,” Leach wrote in his diary. “The destruction was so complete I could not determine the cause, but it was not the fault of the gun crew.”

On the 28th of January, Leach got his first chance to go up in an observation balloon, used extensively in World War I for spotting for the artillery. “I never had to call on so much nerve before. I put on a fur lined suit and had the parachute strapped on me and climbed into the basket about four feet square and started up. The sensation was terrific.” The balloon ascended to 2,000 feet.

In mid-February, the regiment began moving toward the front. On February 20, they arrived at Luneville. “At 7 a.m. I heard my first of the guns.” By the 26th, Leach was involved in placing his guns. “Returning on the road to Pexonne, we had a close call from a shrapnel shell... This has been my first experience under fire, and it is not as bad as I thought it would be.”

The regiment, about three kilometers behind the trenches, began exchanging fire with the German batteries, using forward observation from hilltops and from periscopes along the trench line. On March 4, Leach escorted Col. Douglas MacArthur, who at that time was the division’s chief of staff, through the gun emplacements.

That same night, the Germans attacked the Rainbow Division’s lines and 20 men were killed. The attack failed, and the Germans were driven off. The next day, March 5, there was heavy shelling all along the line, with several wounded. “This has been a bad day,” he wrote.

On the 6th, Leach was resting in the hay loft of a barn that was his quarters when a sentry informed him that a “general officer” wanted to talk to him. Leach descended the ladder and turned around to find himself face to face with Gen. Pershing, leader of the American forces. Leach came to attention and Pershing immediately asked him what he had done to prepare himself to be a leader of a regiment of artillery. Leach stammered out the best answer he could in a minute’s time. “If the general was impressed with my stated qualifications, he did not show it, and with as little ceremony as announced his arrival, he was gone.”

The Division made its first attack on the German lines on March 9. Leach’s batteries fired 5,422 rounds in support of the advance. The regiment had 20 casualties from German shelling. The next day, Leach found out that 25 of his men had been gassed and were feeling the effects.

On March 15, Leach was inspecting his positions when a German shell hit about 100 yards in front of his car. Because they were artillery men, they knew the next shell would be closer and they dove for the ditch. "The next shell struck the front of the car, cutting the steering post in two, and exploding in the back seat. As I lit in the ditch, one hand was evidently above the level of the road, and a piece of red hot shell hit me in the finger." The men lay in the ditch for 20 minutes while the Germans destroyed the car with more shelling.

The regiment withdrew from its position on March 22 after a month on the line. Leach spent much of his R&R simply walking in the French countryside. After the rest, the guns and men were returned to their former positions on March 30. Leach now added the division's trench mortars and five French batteries to his responsibilities.

On April 4, Leach went to brigade headquarters and got a pleasant surprise. "I read in the London Times that I had been cited for the D.S.C. [the Distinguished Service Cross, the Army's highest award for valor outside of the Medal of Honor] and it makes me very happy. In the first month of the war I received the highest award at the hands of the President and my number is sixth to be given it in France. I don't deserve it and owe it to the bravery of my men."

Leach explained in his diary that if the Germans hit one of the American roads with five shells, the Americans would respond with ten shells on one of the German roads. In this way, the firing sometimes escalated into a general bombardment. At the same time, both sides had an understanding not to shell the small towns along the front. When the weather was cloudy and the Germans couldn't send up balloon or airplane observers, the 151st often had a band concert. In the distance, you could hear the German bands playing.

On May 23, Leach was inspecting Battery E and found that the men were "tired and discouraged" and had not finished putting their guns in position. The sand bags around the guns were not in place and he ordered them filled "against many protests. Just before daylight one of their guns blew up and if the sand bags had not been filled, every member of the gun crew would have been killed. I was repaid for the tough discipline I had to administer the night before."

The artillery regiments took a hard shelling and a gas attack on May 19; one of them lost 30 men. Leach's regiment had 14 wounded. "We kept up our firing all night and by daylight the gas concentration was very bad and the men exhausted. This was our worst night." It was nothing like what they would face in the future.

On June 14th, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Division again got orders to withdraw for rest. Leach rode horses and toured the countryside in the Moselle River Valley. By late June, the division moved back toward the front at the Marne River.

On July 3, Leach wrote in his diary of his extraordinary luck thus far in the war. On this date he was out for dinner with other officers in the city of Chalon, and although he had leave until morning, he had a hunch he should get back to his regiment. He and his driver were barreling

along in the dark with no headlights due to blackout restrictions. "Without any warning that I can explain, I ordered the driver to stop at once, which he did with such force that we slid for eight or ten feet." The driver flipped on the headlights for a second, and there was a French infantry regiment lying down, resting in the road. "I shudder to think what would have happened."

Back on the road, roaring along again without lights, Leach thought he saw a dark shadow alongside the road. Again he ordered the driver to stop. This time it turned out to be a private from the regiment who had crashed his motorcycle and was unconscious. Leach found a message in the man's pocket and it was orders to Leach to move the regiment before daylight. The motorcyclist had been heading to Chalon to deliver the orders.

On the 12th, Leach called on MacArthur to congratulate him on his promotion to brigadier general. In the following days, the Americans braced for an expected attack by the massed German forces. On the 14th, a French colonel, finding out it was Leach's birthday, had a meal and party prepared. Captured prisoners said the German assault would begin at midnight, and at 10 minutes to 12, the party ended and Leach went to his command post. Sure enough, at midnight the bombardment began. The Germans attacked with six divisions against two Allied divisions as the Battle of Champagne got underway. Four of Leach's guns were blown up in the terrific shelling of the night. By the 17th, the attack had been halted, but at a terrible cost. "Practically all of the French and American soldiers in the front line were killed." Leach's regiment had 45 casualties and 65 horses killed. Leach's batteries fired 54,000 rounds at the enemy. Under intense fire, four artillery pieces were brought up to replace those destroyed. Leach was overwhelmed by the heroism of his men. "I could not mention the name of a man in the regiment today that was not a hero."

The battle continued as the Allies went on the offensive near Chateau Thierry. Leach spent the night of July 25 in a French farmhouse "where I caught the best assortment of cooties I ever had." Leach explained that the French were careful savers of manure for their fields, and kept the pile near the house so they could watch it. "Just as we had prepared a simple supper, a German high explosive shell burst in the center of the pile, with results too disagreeable to mention."

By now the initiative had passed to the Allies, who were driving the Germans back at a rate of about two kilometers a day. The countryside was littered with the bodies of the two armies. "The smell of the dead is very bad," Leach wrote.

In addition to the German artillery, the regiment faced daily attacks from the German air force, which dominated the skies above France. At one point, a German aviator chased Leach and another officer around a tree, "so close that we had the opportunity to empty our automatics at him, but the necessity of dodging his machine gun bullets hindered our marksmanship."

On July 29, Leach recorded that the French city of Sergy was captured and re-captured 11 times over a period of several days. On the 31st, Leach wrote, "The blast of the artillery at my

P.C.[command post] has been so bad since Sunday that I have the peculiar sensation of being loose in every joint.”

On August 2, Leach received a direct order from MacArthur: “Advance with audacity.” The next day, while advancing into territory formerly held by Germans, the regiment came across the grave of Quentin Roosevelt, the youngest son of Theodore Roosevelt. A pilot with the US Army Air Service, Quentin had been shot down in aerial combat on July 14. The grave, located at the site of the crash, had been carefully marked by German forces. Leach wrote to the former president, who later wrote back his thanks for locating the grave.

The personal conditions for the soldiers were awful. “The flies are terrible. It is almost impossible to eat without including them and the unburied dead make a very bad situation from a sanitary standpoint. I am covered with cooties and very uncomfortable.” The regiment was finally relieved on Aug. 10 after 26 straight days of combat. They spent nearly a month recuperating.



**Col. Leach (center) is about to receive the Distinguished Service Cross from AEF Commander, Gen. John Pershing. To Leach's right (getting pinned) is his brigade commander, Douglas MacArthur; to his left is then-Lt. Col. William “Wild Bill” Donovan of the 165<sup>th</sup> Infantry--a distinguished group indeed!**

On Sept. 7, Gen. Pershing formally presented Leach and several other members of the Rainbow Division with the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC). Leach would also earn the Distinguished Service Medal and the Purple Heart during the war, as well as the Legion of Honor, France’s highest award. The DSC ceremony was held on the eve of the drive to wrest the St. Mihiel salient from German control. Gen. MacArthur, who also got the DSC that day, confided to Leach that the assault could cost as many as 75,000 casualties.

On Sept. 12, the attack began with the 42nd Division in the center, supported by three other American divisions. The 42nd was also supported, for the first time in great numbers, by tanks. The troops advanced across No Man’s Land and began pushing the Germans back through the city of

Essey. It was Leach’s duty to keep his artillery up with the advancing infantry. In just over a day, the Americans had pushed the Germans back 19 kilometers and captured seven towns, a thousand prisoners and great stores of ammunition. The German salient was no more.

There was a brief respite after the battle, but by early October, the 151st Field Artillery was in the thick of it again. This time it was the massive Meuse-Argonne offensive.

On Oct. 8, the regiment poured 6,000 shells into the German front lines in several hours. On Oct. 10, Leach described the area: “The desolation of the battlefield is beyond description. Many dead Americans and Germans everywhere. Dead horses along every road. Every building

and every tree destroyed and the ground one mass of muddy shell holes.” This battle marked the loss of one the Rainbow Division’s most famous soldiers, the poet Joyce Kilmer.

Leach and his men went six straight nights without sleep hammering the enemy positions. When they finally got a night to sleep on Oct. 16, nothing could bother them “My P.C. (headquarters) was harassed all night with artillery fire, but we were too tired to care.”

The German lines were slowly breaking apart all along the Western Front, and the 42nd Division went into stand-down for a few days. A new enemy was taking its toll however – sickness. The polluted water, unburied dead, and constant rain brought great misery to the Yanks. On Oct. 27, Leach changed clothes for the first time in six weeks. A few days later, the regiment marked its first year in France, having spent 203 of those days in combat.

On Nov. 1, the regiments supported a Marine Corps attack, and on Nov. 4, the 42nd Division began advancing toward the Meuse River, where they soon pushed the Germans to the other side. The city of Sedan was captured. On Nov. 10, Leach wrote, “There are many rumors of the armistice and there is surprisingly little rejoicing.” The next day was Nov. 11, 1918: “The Armistice is signed and at eleven A.M. the firing ceased. Nothing impressed me so much as the absolute silence.”

The Division earned a splendid reputation during the war and had penetrated farther into the German lines than any other. On Nov. 15, Leach received a letter stating: “The 151st Field Artillery has fired accurately, rapidly and whenever requested. Its liaison with the infantry has been intimate, daring and most satisfactory. Its personnel is magnificent. The courtesy and professional attainments of its officers are exceptionally fine. It has been at all times abreast of the highest standard of gallantry and technical skill.” It was signed by Gen. MacArthur who had just been named commanding officer of the Rainbow Division. MacArthur later said of Leach that he was the finest artillery officer in the army.

The division was part of the Army of Occupation of Germany for four months before returning to the US, where it landed on April 26, 1919. It had been overseas for a year and a half.

The 151st arrived back in Minnesota on May 8, and was honored with huge parades in both Minneapolis and St. Paul. Throngs lined the streets and hung out of windows. “How shall I describe what I felt in that moment? What I felt, I am sure, everyone in the Regiment felt. The vivid sense of relief – the thought of home – childhood memories – pride – sorrow – and chief of all, gratitude to the people of my own town, every one of whom at that moment seemed a friend.”

### **After the war: an extraordinary life**

After the war, Leach returned to civilian life. “I stayed in the regular army as long as I could stand it,” he said. He went back to work in the insurance business as a manager for the St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company. He later established a vending machine company, George E. Leach, Inc. and became chairman of the National Automatic Merchandising Association.



Leach was a famous and bone fide war hero when he returned to Minneapolis in 1919. In 1921, he decided to run for mayor of Minneapolis as a Republican. Politics was rough in Minneapolis in those days, and Leach received phone calls that if he continued his quest for mayor, his house would be burned down. Leach won by 10,000 votes, and the day after the election his house was indeed burned to the ground. He was elected mayor four times in the 1920s until he was defeated in 1929.

Leach was a charter member of American Legion Post 1 in Minneapolis. In 1922, he journeyed with a Minnesota contingent to Chicago for the American Legion national convention. A strong believer in military preparedness, he proposed support at the convention for universal military service in the US, an issue that became part of the Legion's platform for many years.

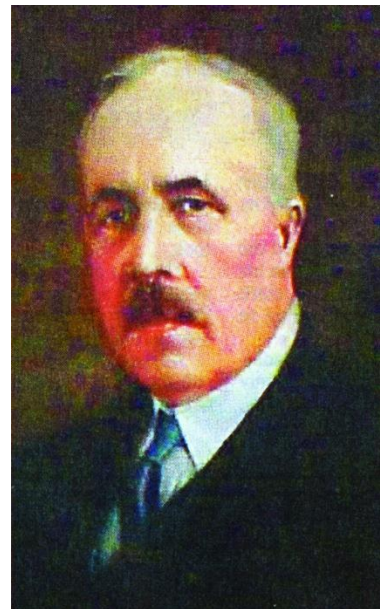
In 1924, he married again, this time to Anita M. Churcher, a dancer and physical education instructor he had met while on occupation duty in France. She had been with a USO troupe and stayed in France to work with the Y.M.C.A. They had two children.

Leach was an avid skier. In 1924 he helped organize and manage the US Olympic Ski Team that competed in the inaugural Winter Games in Chamonix, France. He was the National Ski Association representative to the ski congress, which met during those first Olympics and led to the creation of the International Ski Federation. He was posthumously elected to the National Ski Hall of Fame in Ishpeming, Michigan.

In 1929, like many Americans, he was heavily invested in the stock market, and when it collapsed, he owed \$34,000. He was urged to take bankruptcy, but like his father before him, he instead worked to pay off his debt, which he finally did in 1935.

He became Chief of the National Guard Bureau in Washington from 1931 to 1935, during which he was promoted to Major General. He returned to Minneapolis and in 1937 was elected as president of the National Guard Association. That year he also again ran for mayor and was again elected for two more terms, leaving office in 1941. He stayed in the National Guard after World War I. He was promoted to brigadier general in 1923 and commanded the 59th Field Artillery Brigade of the 34th Division (with a break during his 1931-35 tenure with the Militia Bureau) until July 1940 when he was appointed as commander of the 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division until his official retirement in February 1941.

He died in Los Angeles July 17, 1955, at age 79 and is buried in Fort Snelling National Cemetery.



**Leach as mayor of Minneapolis in the late 1930s.**