

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Ripon’s Cream of the Crop unit part of historic division

Veterans Day is celebrated each year on Nov. 11 to honor U.S. military veterans, past and present.

It has been a federal holiday since 1926 and was first called “Armistice Day.” This was to mark the end of World War I in which there was a cease-fire, or armistice, on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918.

Memorial Day, celebrated at the end of May, honors military members who have died in the line of service to their country while Veteran’s Day recognizes veterans who have served in all branches of the U.S. military.

This year, the Ripon Historical Society honors the 28 members of the Ripon Red Arrow Division of the Wisconsin Army National Guard Headquarters Detachment, 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry Regiment of the 32 Infantry Division.

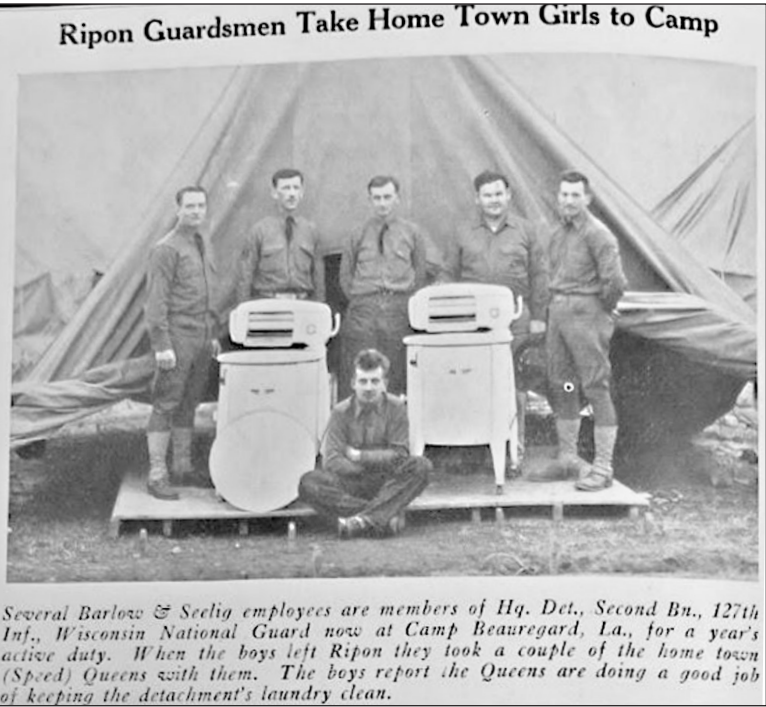
Locally the unit was known as the “Cream of the Crop.” This name was given to the unit by Eugene Von Schallern (1893-1954), mayor of Ripon from 1940 to 1954, in front of an audience as the unit left for Camp Beauregard in Louisiana on Oct. 15, 1940. Following that part of their journey, the group was sent on to Camp Livingston, La.

When the Ripon soldiers left for Camp Beauregard they took along two Barlow & Seelig (now known as “Alliance Laundry Systems”) Speed Queen washing machines. Six members of this military contingent were employees at Barlow & Seelig.

A photo of them and the washing machines was featured in the January-February 1941 manufacturing company newsletter, the “Speed Queen Agitator.”

The newsletter announced “Maybe ‘femme de guerre’ (translates French to English language as “war women”) aren’t allowed in Camp Beauregard, La., but the Ripon detachment of the National Guard had no trouble at all getting a couple of Speed Queens past the sentries. And the ‘girls they left behind’ aren’t fretting a bit, because they know you cannot go wrong with a Speed Queen.”

After Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese on Dec. 7, 1941



**THIS CLIPPING CAME** from the January-February 1941 Barlow & Seelig (now known as “Alliance Laundry Systems”) company newsletter. The Ripon soldiers of the 32nd Division took two Speed Queen washing machines with them when they left for active duty in October 1940. Featured in the photo were Barlow & Seelig enlisted employees Paul Suwalski, Jon Adamski, Walter Zweigier, Gailerd Wagner, Rueben Smith and Carl Gneiser.



**THIS 1979 CLIPPING** from the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* shows members of the Ripon 32nd Division The Cream of the Crop at their annual reunion and also in 1939 before World War II started. The clipping is found in a scrapbook about The Cream of the Crop that was donated to the Ripon Historical Society in 1995.

and America joined World War II, this same military unit was deployed to the South Pacific, where it engaged in extensive action in New Guinea. It also was in the Philippines and Australia; a few went on to the European theater.

The Ripon men helped to make up the 32nd Division, which consisted of 11,392 soldiers from the Wisconsin National Guard and much of the Michigan National Guard.

In a 2020 article commemorating the 75th anniversary of the end of WWII, Vaughn R. Larson of the Department of Military Affairs said that “the division spent more days in combat than any other American unit against a determined enemy and unforgiving terrain.”

The article went on to say that “from the Owen Stanley Mountains in New Guinea to Luzon, Philippines, the 32nd Division had walked that long, winding and deadly road for 654 days of

intense combat, more than any other American unit.”

The 32nd Division had many “firsts” during World War II. It was the first U.S. division to deploy as an entire unit overseas and to be moved in a single convoy from the United States to the front lines. It was also among the first United States division to fight an offensive action against the Japanese in the southwest Pacific.

It claimed the following records during World War II:

- 654 days of combat, more than any other division in the war;
- 15,696 hours of combat, more than any U.S. division in any war, and 48% of the total time the U.S. was in World War II;
- Six major engagements during four campaigns;
- 41 months overseas, with more than 21 months in combat;
- Responsible for 35,000 Japanese soldiers killed in action;
- 11 Medals of Honor, 157 Distinguished Service Crosses, 49 Legion of Merit, 845 Silver Stars, 1,854 Bronze Stars, 98 Air Medals and 78 Soldier’s Medals;
- 11,500 Purple Hearts
- 1,613 of its own unit members killed in action (two from the Ripon group), 5,627 wounded, 27 missing in action and one prisoner of war;

Upon the announcement of Japan’s surrender on Aug. 15, 1945, Major General William Gill, 32nd Division commander said “I doubt if anyone, anywhere, is more profoundly moved by this news than the men of this division, who have fought so hard, suffered so much and waited so long for this moment.”

However, the 32nd Division were still fighting Japanese hold-outs after the official Japanese surrender. Fifteen years after World War II ended, the members of the Ripon “Cream of the Crop” started having reunions in the Ripon and Green Lake area.

The first reunion was held in 1960 with 16 members of the group

in attendance. The last known reunion was held more than 50 years later in 1995. By the 35th reunion, the last known reunion held, only eight of the original 28 members attended.

**Memories and mementos**

In 1995, those still living from the “Cream of the Crop” voted to donate their scrapbook of memories from World War II until 1995 to the Ripon Historical Society. This book, now in the historical society’s permanent archives, holds photographs from their initial deployment to Louisiana through World War II, newspaper articles, invitations to reunions, minutes from the annual meetings, members’ wedding photos and obituaries of former members who had died.

**A modern Red Arrow lives on**

In 1967, 50 years after being first organized for World War I, the 32nd Division was reorganized as the 32nd Separate Infantry Brigade.

Nearly all the Wisconsin Army National Guard’s current units trace their lineage to the 32nd Division and the Red Arrow remains the largest formation in the Wisconsin National Guard today.

This modern day Red Arrow continued into the next century, as it played a major role in the global war on terror in the years following Sept. 11, 2001.

Elements of this 32nd Division deployed to Iraq multiple times before the entire 32nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team deployed in 2009 to various camps in Iraq to support Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The Red Arrow added another chapter to its storied legacy in 2019 and 2020, when it deployed two infantry battalions to Afghanistan. This brigade also continues to respond to emergencies in Wisconsin.

*The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.*

*For more information follow us at Facebook/riponhistory or www.riponhistory.org.*

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