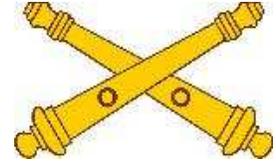




The Citizen Soldiers of the 111th Field Artillery



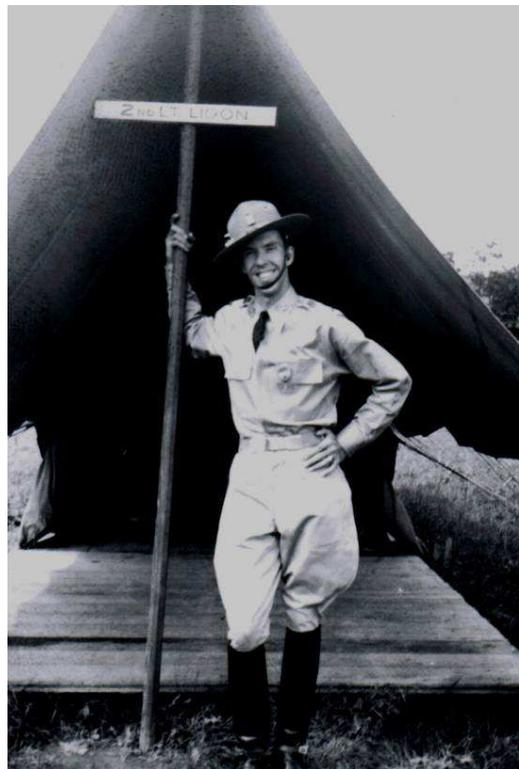
Tom Ligon, Jr.

Stephen Ambrose has written books on military history, including *Citizen Soldiers: The U. S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany*, and *D Day: June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II*. One of my fellow SIGMans, Dr. David Brin, promotes the role of the “citizen soldier” in this nation’s history. I think that’s laudable, and would like to toss in a story my family uncovered that ties in to the idea.

This is the story of Citizen Soldiers of the most magnificent sort. This is the story of the 111th Field Artillery, a battalion in the 29th Infantry Division. Before the Second World War the 29th was a National Guard division in Maryland, Virginia, and DC. Battery A of the 111th FA had a long history, and at one point was known as the “Richmond Howitzers”. The 111th exists to this day, presently in the form of a regiment.

My father is not really the focus of this tale, just the key that unlocked it for me, personally. If you are not familiar with the distinction between the Guard and the regular Army, the National Guard is a volunteer army, which can be called into active service in times of war. Most members are part-time, typically training one weekend a month and for a couple of weeks a year. It is important to remember they have regular jobs outside of their Guard duties. On average they tend to be a little older than professional soldiers of the same rank, but this may give them a bit more maturity and allows them to bring in outside experience younger professional soldiers may not have had time to achieve. When my father joined, the nation was in the Great Depression, so no doubt many members sought a little extra income, but for the most part they were simply patriots, people who had been kids during The Great War, and considered it their duty to serve. In peacetime, Guard units are usually under state control, and their commanders in chief are the Governors of their respective states.

A decade before the outbreak of WWII, Dad joined the National Guard as a buck private. He rose thru the ranks, finally becoming a First Sergeant in January 1937. Within months an opportunity opened up for him to become an officer. He was qualified, with a college degree and a professional career as a research chemist, and had passed the required training. He apparently had managed to impress his superior, one Lt. Thornton Mullins, who was being promoted up to a job in battalion headquarters. In a flurry of activity just four



**2nd Lt Tom Ligon is the one on the right.
The thing on the left is a tent pole.**

months after making First Sergeant, Dad became a Second Lieutenant. A rather skinny Second Lieutenant, but that's another story.

My father's military career was one step behind Mullins. We know my father and his wife socialized with Mullins and his wife outside of the National Guard. Dad told me he knew a war was coming, and that they intended to be prepared. I have to believe he looked up to Mullins and probably acquired many of his ideas on military and political matters from Mullins. This was likely one of those ideas, and it must have been a topic they discussed at any rate. Unlike the Vietnam era when some people joined the Guard to avoid the draft, the Citizen Soldiers from Dad's era knew that if a war came, they would be called to active duty. And they did believe it was coming, regardless of what the politicians had to say.

I was about twelve when Dad decided it was time to teach me to shoot. He bought a pellet rifle and tried to teach me, but I could not hit the target. Dad said he had taught 1200 men to shoot to the Marksman level in his Guard days, and if he could not teach me, there must be something wrong with my eyes. He was correct. A week later I had my first pair of glasses, and quickly learned to hit the target.

This tells me that, even if they were cannon-cockers, the 111th Field Artillery members were expected to be able to hit what they were aiming at with a rifle. I also know that my father participated in recreational target shooting with a group of Guard



Dad (back seat) and Thornton Mullins

buddies. I expect Mullins was one of them. If so, Mullins was a crack shot, and proud of it.

A few years later, the Army was preparing for what seemed like a much more likely war. Early 1941 saw a number of Guard units drawn from their usual role as State militia, under the command of Governors, to National Guard of the United States. About this time my father was promoted to First Lieutenant in the National Guard, and before the ink was dry on that promotion, on to Captain in the US Army. Some time in this upheaval he was transferred to the 967th Field Artillery, and sent to the Battery Officer's Course. Mullins remained with the 111th FA.

By 1944, Mullins had been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, in command of the 111th. While the 967th was equipped with 155 mm howitzers, the 111th was at that time equipped with the smaller 105 mm howitzer. The smaller gun was more mobile and was considered better for

an amphibious assault. Furthermore, while the 967th was an independent organization which could be attached to support infantry divisions at will, the 111th was an integral part of the 29th Division, and closely associated with the 116th Infantry, another unit nationalized from the Virginia Guard.

As a result, Colonel Mullins found himself in the third wave to hit Omaha Beach on D-Day, June 6, 1944, the day immortalized in the movie "The Longest Day."

For both the 116th and 111th, the day was a disaster. Omaha was heavily defended from fortified pillboxes and gun emplacements on bluffs overlooking the beach. The Army Air Corp had erred in their bomb drops, hitting too far inland in order to avoid hitting our forces. Consequently, the first waves of infantry to hit the beach were badly bloodied, and failed to make any progress inland. The result was carnage on the sands, and a traffic jam in the waters just offshore.

The seas were rough. Some genius had decided that a 105 mm howitzer and its crew could be landed on an amphibious truck known as a DUKW or "Duck". Maybe this was true under ideal conditions. In fact, only one gun of the 111th Field Artillery made it to shore that day, and the rest wound up on the bottom. I found, then lost, a reference to a story about it, but I believe the surviving gun was a Richmond-based piece, part of Dad's Battery A, and known to its crew as "The Chief." Some quick thinking by a few of the crew managed to keep the Duck afloat long enough that the gun could be offloaded to a barge, but it was then donated to another FA outfit that had lost a number of its own guns. The Chief was in the fray by nightfall, but the 111th was an artillery unit with no artillery.

Many of the men of the 111th did make it to shore though, and were pinned down with the infantry. At this point those readers of military history who have read accounts of D-Day may recognize just where this story has been leading ... how Thornton Mullins became one of the iconic figures of that day on Bloody Omaha. He rallied his men, saying "To hell with our artillery mission, we're infantrymen now." He proceeded to organize his men to attempt to take the high ground. Now you see the rifle connection ... the 111th had always prepared to fight with small arms if needed, every man a marksman. I expect Mullins, a crack shot himself, figured they were up to it. He was wounded twice, each time getting patched up and heading back into the fray. The third time up he was killed in action.

The 116th Infantry lost over 300 killed. Because of its National Guard origins, the individual units tended to be composed of men from particular locales. Company A included 35 men from the small town of Bedford, VA, 19 of whom were killed in the first fifteen minutes of fighting. Many of the rest were Virginians, including many Richmonders my father had trained with. Can you imagine the response of a city or town today experiencing combat losses of that magnitude?

And yet, in spite of these losses, they kept fighting. By nightfall these Citizen Soldiers had the high ground. After D-Day, the 111th re-armed, re-equipped, and fought on.

If my father had been there, I expect he would have gone right up that hill beside his mentor. I might not be writing this. As it was, Dad landed a few weeks later, on almost the same stretch of beach. The 967th found itself supporting the 29th Division in the fierce fighting in hedgerow country, and Dad discovered what had happened to his good friend. He tried to write a letter to Mullins' widow, but it was returned with a terse reprimand from a censor ... condolence letters were not permitted.

After my father passed away, one of my sisters found the letter still in Dad's stuff, and contacted an Army historian. When Mullins Corner was rededicated at Ft. Pickett, Virginia, that letter found a place in the display cases memorializing Colonel Mullins.

I certainly don't mean to put down the regular army, and the draftees who filled the ranks did their jobs well, with heroes aplenty. But the role these Citizen Soldiers played in that conflict must not be under-appreciated. Without their willingness to sacrifice their time to prepare for a war nobody wanted to admit was coming, to give up weekends and weeks training, we would not have been prepared for the war. Without their uncompromising sense of duty, if instead they had taken the attitude that it was somebody else's responsibility, who would have stepped up? Without their experience, how could our undermanned regular army have possibly supplied the leadership needed to command the flood of new volunteers and draftees once the war started?

And once the war was over? Most returned to civilian life, perhaps remaining in the Reserves as my father did, but they resumed their old careers, or started new ones. And unlike their Regular Army compatriots, the Citizen Soldiers felt no obligation to stay out of politics. Look around you, and see what changes they wrought, these men whose sense of duty made them serve to protect the sweet things they enjoyed as civilians.