

CHAPTER I

IN THE BEGINNING

The history of the 107th Combat Engineer Battalion is intertwined inseparably with that of Calumet's Company A, for it is in the organization of this Company that the Battalion's roots are firmly planted and the official lineage drawn. However, this history will also touch on the activities of the Militia Companies in those other Upper Peninsula towns that ultimately became an integral part of the Battalion. It is from them that the moral, if not official, lineage is drawn. Company A was organized on September 5, 1880, as a private military Company under the name of the Calumet Light Guard. Under the elected leadership of Captain Henry Wilkins, the unit's major activities appeared to consist of marching at various parades and local celebrations. However, upon the unit's organization, immediate efforts were made to have the Light Guards accepted into State service. This proved difficult to do as Michigan was already at full quota and space for an additional Company was not authorized. State Senator Joseph Chandler of Houghton came to the Company's rescue and drafted a special bill admitting the Light Guards to the status of Michigan State Troops. In response, jubilant men of the Calumet unit duly dubbed Senator Chandler as the 'Father of the Company.'¹

The establishment of the Michigan State Troops created a coordinated force from semi-independent Militia groups. The reason for the existence of the State Troops was to preserve the peace of the commonwealth in the case of civil dissensions. They were intended for local use, and not as a reserve for the Federal government. Units could volunteer for active Federal service in the event of war, but could not be called up unwillingly. The enlisted men elected officers. The minimum age for membership was 18 and the maximum 45. All served for a three-year enlistment.

In December of 1894, the volunteer units were integrated to the degree that the name of Michigan State Troops was changed to the Michigan National Guard. The new organization created five infantry Regiments, three of which would eventually be ordered to active duty in 1898 for the Spanish American War. In this case Michigan offered the units to the Federal government.

The reason the Calumet Light Guards entered State service was not purely a patriotic one. As a private Company, the required uniforms, weapons, and equipment would have to be purchased privately. As a State unit, the State of Michigan would provide them. On August 8, 1881, the Calumet Light Guards were officially mustered into the Michigan State Troops as Company B, 2nd Battalion of Infantry.

The officers of the new patriotic remained the same as the original private unit. Henry Wilkins was the Captain, James N. Cox, First Lieutenant, and John B. Curtis, Second Lieutenant.

The membership of the unit included numerous men who would later rise to military prominence. Sergeants Henry Fliege and Edward Gierson would command the unit as captains, while Sergeant Frank B. Lyon would eventually not only command the 5th Regiment, but also be promoted to Brigadier General. He was the first of four men from the Battalion's lineage to reach general grade rank. Another was First Lieutenant Cox who later became the Adjutant General of Michigan. Private John P. Peterman later as a Colonel commanded the 34th Michigan Volunteer Infantry Regiment (formed the 5th Regiment) during the Spanish American War. All in all, the original Calumet Light Guards provided a remarkable wealth of talented men.²

By today's standards the Calumet Company was certainly a 'light' Company as the strength was only three officers and 72 men. Not content to leave well enough alone, the State of Michigan would redesignate the unit as Company H, 3rd Infantry Regiment in 1883, and redesignate it again in December of 1891 as Company D, 5th Infantry Regiment. ³

Life in the early Militia Companies was a colorful affair, far different from unit operations today. The Marquette unit, part of the same Regiment as the Calumet Light Guards, provides an interesting look into the past.

The unit first known as the Marquette Militia Company was organized 1874 and soon accepted into the Michigan State Troops since a vacancy had existed. Later the unit was known under a variety of names, including Marquette Chasseurs, Rifles, Light Guards and City Infantry. Drills were held twice weekly, on Tuesday and Friday evenings in the city council rooms, although since there was no definite State requirement, the number of drills fluctuated as interest in the unit rose and fell.

The early equivalent of the present-day Annual General Inspection was the Annual Muster of Inspection when the unit was deluged with high-ranking officers of both the State Militia and Regular Army. ⁴

The 1892 inspection of the Marquette Rifles was a good example of the similarity between past and present. After the full dress inspection and a long drill in the fatigue uniform, the inspector, General H. B. Lothrop of the State Headquarters, stated that he was '...gratified to find all of the property of the State present and accounted for, everything clean and neatly in their places.' He praised the care shown by the '...bright and highly polished rifles and accouterments...' but was somewhat perturbed since the polishing had worn the bluing completely off the barrels and bolts of the rifles!

Following the official inspection, all of the Company, with the inspectors, '...sat down to a collation (light meal) in the Company dining room and a very jolly hour or two was passed about the table, toasts and speeches enlivening the occasion.' The Rifles Quartet entertained as well as did several instrumental soloists. ⁵

Washington's Birthday and July 4 were usually occasions calling for a large parade with a military dress ball to follow. In 1875 the Marquette Mining Journal recorded:

'The afternoon street parade called out our citizens, it being the first appearance of the Company since receiving the new uniforms from the State. At the drill held later, quite a number of ladies and gentlemen witnessed the evolutions of the Company with interest and frequent applause. An evening banquet was attended by 60 members.'

The unit was the only in the State to have their own band. At the time, 1875, it was also the only State Company in the entire Upper Peninsula and a great source of local pride. That same year the Governor, visiting the area with a group of legislators, took the time to inspect the unit. ⁶

Annual receptions were also normal. The 1892 affair in Marquette drew much notice from the city. The honored guests were the local members of the G.A.R. (Grand Army of the Republic), an organization of Civil War veterans. An orchestra played popular dance music, while at 10 p.m. during an intermission, a special drill exhibition was held and declared the best given in years. Dancing followed and continued until 3 a.m. ⁷

The various units also supported many local civic activities. In the 1890's, the 5th Regimental Band in Calumet regularly played Norwegian folk song concerts for annual celebrations honoring Norway's independence! ⁸

Annual encampments were held for the State Troops at various sites in the Lower Peninsula. Locations included Mackinaw, Battle Creek, Brighton (Island Lake), Whitemore Lake, and Grosse Isle. Like the present day Annual Training periods, it was the only time during the year when all of the State's units were brought together for training.

In 1875 the Marquette unit traveled to Grosse Isle aboard the steamer KEWEENAW. The review of the troops at this camp drew a crowd of over 8,000 people.' ⁹

Crowds during following years generally ran about the same size. The Militia was a popular organization!

It is interesting to imagine some of the problems faced by the troops and their commanders during these early encampments. One particular problem seems to have been the number of women the officers kept in camp. In an 1895 letter from the Adjutant General of Michigan to his Wisconsin counterpart, the comment was made that: ¹⁰

'The presence of feminine relatives of officers in camp of instruction this State is discouraged as much as possible. No line officer is allowed to have ladies at his quarters over night and the Field Staff Officers are gradually abandoning the practice.'

Reading between the lines would suggest the practice must have been very popular prior to 1895!

By 1881, there were units not only in Calumet and Marquette, but also in Houghton and Hancock. Units were later formed in Menominee, Iron Mountain and Ironwood. Thus was established the tradition of the National Guard in the Upper Peninsula, and the lineage of the Battalion.