

Virginia and World War One

Virginians followed the course of the European war and the nation's escalating tensions with Germany with interest. Even before U.S. involvement, numerous volunteers from the Commonwealth traveled overseas to fight in foreign military units or to serve as civilian medical personnel or ambulance drivers.

The state's most prominent war-era figure was President Woodrow Wilson. Even though the Virginia native had moved from the Old Dominion in his childhood and later rose to national prominence as the president of Princeton University and Governor of New Jersey, he entered the dynasty of Virginia-born U.S. Presidents on his election in 1912.

After Wilson and the U.S. Congress declared war in April 1917, Virginians responded quickly. In 1918, state draftees numbered 60,836 men, 39% of whom were African American. All total, including National Guard units and volunteers, the Commonwealth provided 73,062 soldiers (1.94% of the Army).

Virginia's military units were the 29th Division, 42nd Division, 80th Division, 510th and 511th Engineer Service Battalions, and Base Hospitals Nos. 41 and 45. At the same time, numerous Virginians also served in other U.S. military units.

29th Division: Trained at Camp McClellan, Anniston, Ala., the 29th Division was composed of National Guard units from Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey and Virginia. It adopted the nickname it still carries today, "Blue and Gray," reflecting the fact that it had units from both sides of the Civil War now standing together against a common foe.

42nd Division: One Virginia National Guard unit comprised of Coastal Artillery soldiers from Roanoke became the 117th Trains Headquarters and Military Police in the 42nd Infantry Division, which received the name "Rainbow Division" during its organization at Camp Mills, Long Island, New York in 1917. Then Chief of Staff Colonel Douglas MacArthur noted that, as the Division was made of National Guard units from 26 states, it "stretches like a Rainbow from one end of America to the other."

80th Division: Four Virginia units comprised of draftees included the 318th Infantry, 317th Infantry, 34th Machine Gun Battalion, and 319th Ambulance Company. The 80th Division was first organized on August 5, 1917 in the National Army and headquartered at Camp Lee, Va.

510th and 511th Engineer Service Battalions: Two African American military units from Virginia were organized at Camp Lee, Va., and were made up of black soldiers (draftees) and white officers and noncommissioned officers.

Base Hospital No. 41: Sponsored by the University of Virginia, funded by the Elks War Relief Committee.

Base Hospital No. 45: Sponsored by the Medical College of Virginia, funded by Richmond Chapter, Red Cross.

Over 100,000 Virginians served in WWI, with over 3,700 dying from disease, combat and training accidents.

Adapted and excerpted from the Virginia WWI Centennial website: www.virginiaworldwari.org

World War I Memorials in Virginia: www.lynnrainville.org/ww1-memorials

World War I Museums in Virginia: www.virginiaworldwari.org/copy-of-places-to-visit

World War I and Virginia Overview: www.virginiaworldwari.org/world-war-i-historical-overview