

Cranford in the “War to End All War”

by Vic Bary

April 6, 2017 marks the 100th anniversary of America’s entry into WW I, when the US declared war on Germany. Known alternately as the “Great War” and the “War to End All War”, WW I was the first truly global war. Over 300 local citizens are recognized for uniformed service during WW I on the plaque in Cranford’s Memorial Park, and 15 are identified as having died in service during WW I (due to accidents and Spanish Flu as well as killed in action).

The Origins of War

With the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand on July 28, 1914, the European powers began the "War to End all War", pitting the Allied Powers of England, France and Russia against the Central Powers of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. The United States formally took an isolationist position, yet it clearly favored the Allied Powers, and sold munitions and war materials to them. This so-called "neutrality" didn't fool Germany. In April, 1915 the German Consulate published a warning in U.S. newspapers next to the notice of the May 1 New York to Liverpool sailing schedule for the ocean liner "Lusitania". It stated that ships flying the flag of Great Britain were subject to being engaged by German war ships. The Germans knew that Lusitania’s holds contained a large amount of munitions and war materials. The ocean liner sailed on May 1, and on May 7 the German submarine U-20 sunk it off southern Ireland with the loss of 1,119 lives, 123 of them American.

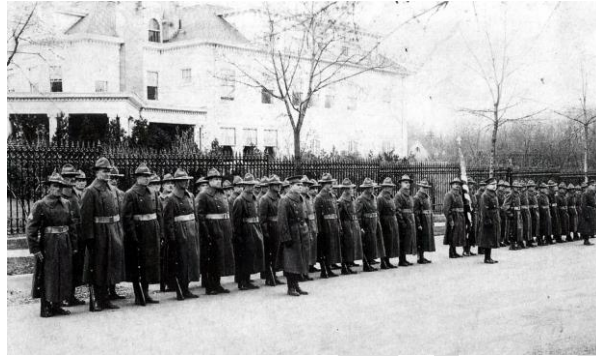
The following year, on July 30, 1916, German agents started fires at the "Black Tom" munitions depot in Jersey City. Two million pounds of ammunition and 100,000 pounds of TNT ignited, blowing out windows for miles around. (In his oral history recording for the Cranford Historical Society, local resident George F. Richards recalled that the explosion rattled windows in Cranford, and the next day he climbed a tree to see the smoke cloud which was still rising from Black Tom.) It was becoming increasingly difficult to remain neutral.

The final straw came in early 1917, when England gave the U.S. the intercepted "Zimmermann Telegram" sent from German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann to Heinrich von Eckhardt, his ambassador to Mexico. The telegram told Eckhardt that, if the U.S. entered into war against Germany as a result of Germany's planned resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare on February 1, he was to propose to Mexico that it join Germany in war against the U.S. It promised Mexico funds and assistance in re-conquering Texas and the American Southwest.

President Wilson released the telegram to the Associated Press on March 1, 1917. A day later, Zimmermann foolishly authenticated it. On March 18, German submarines sunk three American ships. On April 6, 1917, the U.S. Congress approved a declaration of war against Germany. At that time, America had only 121,000 men in the regular Army, and another 181,000 in National Guard units. (By the end of the War, 4.8 million men would have served, 58% of who were drafted.) President Wilson signed a Selective Service (Draft) into law on May 18, 1917.

The Home Guard

Likely at least in part over concerns about acts of sabotage and the loyalty of German-Americans, the Governor of New Jersey called for the formation of Home Guards in March, 1917, a month before the US declared war on Germany. Nearly 200 Cranford residents answered the call of the Cranford Home Guard. Beliefs about racial and gender “equality” being what they were in 1917, a separate Colored Home Guard and a Home Guard Women’s Auxiliary were also formed.



Cranford Home Guard

Cranford Home Guardsmen were sworn in as special police officers and the township purchased 150 Standard Arms Model G gas-operated .35 caliber rifles with which to arm them. The Guardsmen initially patrolled the township at night, but when it soon became apparent that there would be no acts of sabotage and that local German-Americans were fiercely American in their loyalties, membership dropped to 150. Nighttime patrolling was abandoned in favor of drilling (first at the Grant School on Holly Street and later at the Elizabeth Armory), marching, support of Bond drives, and participation in various patriotically-themed social events. On the night of July 11, 1918, they also guarded an Army Signal Corps airplane that had to set down in the Osceola Farms cornfields due to mechanical difficulties.

In December, 1917, Home Guards were made part of the New Jersey Militia (which took the place of the National Guard when it was mustered into Federal service). Cranford’s was commanded by Captain James. H. Frazier.

In early October, 1918 the Cranford Home Guard was deployed to Perth Amboy to keep order and protect property under Federally-declared martial law. An accidental explosion at the T. A. Gillespie Shell loading plant in Sayreville on October 4th led to 6 kilotons of explosions (one of the largest recorded non-nuclear explosions) and fires that spread to neighboring South Amboy and Perth Amboy. The Cranford Home Guard Women’s Auxiliary was also on hand to distribute food and reunite separated family members.

Eager to Serve

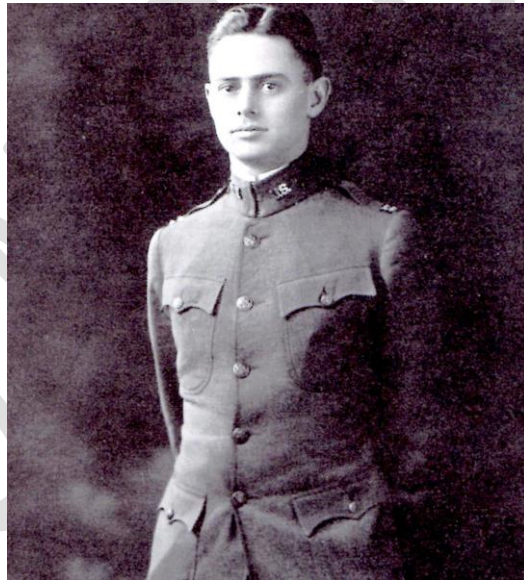
While many Cranfordites would quickly step forward for military service with America’s entry into WW I, the “early to serve” award must surely belong to Cranford’s Dominick Pelusio. Pelusio enlisted in the Canadian Army July 20, 1915. (As a member of the British Commonwealth, Canada was already at war with Germany.) In April of 1916 he sailed for France with the Foresters Battalion of the 14th Infantry, where he survived the 8-month Battles of the Somme with only a minor wound. His luck turned for the worse January 2, 1917 when he was felled by poison gas. He was treated in English and then Canadian hospitals, and appeared well enough that he returned to

Cranford in April to address the Red Cross and local school classes at the time America had joined the War. Unfortunately, effects of the gas were permanent and severe, and Pelusio died in January 1918 in Ottawa, where he is interred in a military cemetery. The Pelusio family would be one of many Cranford families furnishing multiple members to the War effort. Dominick's brother Antonio served in the American Army.

The WW I Navy memoirs of local George P. Slayback, Jr. illustrate just how unprepared this nation, with a standing Army of only 121,000, was to quickly mobilize to field a military of nearly 5 million. A student at NYU, Slayback enlisted in the Navy May 4, 1917, anticipating that it would be able to take him into active service faster than the Army. Over the next 6 months he made repeated requests for immediate service, finally being sent to a Navy training facility November 14, 1917.

First Loss

This sad honor goes to CPT Newell Rodney Fiske (after whom the local VFW post is named) who was the first American officer killed at Chateau Thierry July 15, 1918. He was also Cranford's first serviceman killed in action, and was serving with Company B, 7th Infantry Regiment, Third Infantry Division in the Marne offensive when he was killed. For his heroic actions, Fiske was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, America's second highest award for heroism.



CPT Rodney Newell Fiske

They Made A Movie About Me

On October 2, 1918, 554 men in 9 companies of the 77th Infantry Division, whose division patch was the Statue of Liberty as most of its soldiers were from New York and New Jersey, pushed into the Argonne. The companies were led by Major Charles Whittlesey, a lawyer in civilian life. They were to be supported on their left flank by the French and on the right flank by another American unit, and had orders from their commanding general that there was to be no retreat. The French stalled and Whittlesey's troops got ahead of the supporting American unit, and were quickly surrounded and cut off in a ravine in the Charlevaux Mill area. The supporting units were ordered to retreat.

With communication to the rear cut off, and no idea that they were unsupported, for six days Whittlesey's troops continued to fight, refusing German entreaties for them to surrender, and held on until relieved. They became known as "the lost battalion". During that period, they lost 60 men to a misdirected American artillery barrage. In all 197 men were killed in action (KIA) and 150 were missing. When relieved, Whittlesey had 194 men left. In a war typified by static trench warfare and meaningless slaughter, it was a truly uplifting tale of courage and determination. Whittlesey and two other officers would be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for their actions during this engagement. A&E made a movie about it - "The Lost Battalion" - starring Rick Schroder as Major Whittlesey which is available on Netflix, and which I highly recommend.



LT Joseph P. Heuer

Lt. Joseph P. Heuer, who was serving with Company K of the 307th Infantry Regiment, 77th Infantry Division, is our Cranford connection to the Lost Battalion. Falling back from its own advanced position, his unit united with Whittlesey's and participated in this important battle. His recollections of it and of his service in WWI are captured in a Society oral history recording.

Brothers in Arms

A number of Cranford brothers served their country in WWI. Dominick and Antonio Pelusio have already been mentioned. Thanks to local newspapers we have this photo of Marine PVT Elliott Moody and brother Army Corporal Ray Moody taken in Koblenz am Rhein in 1919 as occupying forces. (Their brother John would later found the bond rating agency Moody's Investors Services.)



Moody Brothers

PVT Frederick M. Quine died in action November 1, 1918 serving with the 78th Infantry Division. His brother, CPL Henry Quine of the 313th Infantry Regiment, 79th Infantry Division survived his War service.

The War also united a number of Cranford's young men in faraway places. Images of America: Cranford Volume II has a photo on page 69 of Cranford Marines Harold "Pin" Chamberlin, George Schindler and Elliott Moody taken in Brest France. The following page has a photo of Army servicemen Marvin D. Hall and LT Dean Mathey taken in Cannes, France 1919. Mathey would later become an internationally ranked tennis player.

Some of the 'Brothers' Over There wore Skirts

By America's entry into WW I, both the US Army (1901) and the US Navy (1908) had established Nursing Corps. Most of these nurses worked in stateside hospitals or on hospital ships, but others drove ambulances and served in hospitals on the Western Front. While we do not have any records of Cranford women in these uniformed services, the Red Cross provided an outlet for women to serve on the front lines, either as nurses or as non-nurse volunteers. (A number of WWI vets interviewed in CHS Oral Histories speak highly of Red Cross volunteers.)



Vara Heaton Mirriam

One of those volunteers was Cranford's Vara Heaton Mirriam shown here packed and on her way to serve as a Red Cross volunteer in recreation huts attached to American Expeditionary Force (AEF) hospitals. She arrived shortly after the Armistice was signed and served until mid-1919. An accomplished pianist, she often entertained her "Boys" either as a soloist or with impromptu patient bands. (Mirriam was the Aunt of WWII SGT Curtis Cullin III, whose invention of the "Rhino" tank device was credited by both Generals Dwight D. Eisenhower and Omar Bradley in their memoirs as critical to the success of the D-Day breakout from the French bocage.)

LT Col. (later Brigadier General) Wade Hampton Hayes served on the staff of famous General "Black Jack" Pershing. His wife joined the Red Cross as a nurse to help out on the Western Front and to be closer to her husband.

The Home Front

Those whose - age, physical condition, gender, or importance of their civilian occupations to the War effort prevented military service - sought ways to support the War effort at home. Many older men, finding military service denied to them, joined the Cranford Home Guard. Many Cranford women helped in various War-related activities - bandage rolling, fund-raising, and service to the wounded in area hospitals such as the 2,500 bed Colonia Hospital.

The Absence of men on the home front also opened new opportunities to Cranford women. A Public Service Corporation advertisement in the October 17, 1918 *Cranford Citizen* offered:

Patriotic Positions for Patriotic Women

Permanent Positions as Conductors on Public
Service Cars

At the same high wages as paid men.

(Italics added for emphasis)

Patriotic citizens grew vegetable gardens and voluntarily reduced telephone and utility use to support the War effort. They also threw themselves into Bond Drives to raise funds to feed the War machine and support their brothers, husbands and sons in arms.

Liberty Bond Drives

One of the most widespread home front activities in support of the War were the Liberty Bond drives. In an era in which the Federal budget ran about \$1 billion annually, the country would need to raise \$30 billion for the War effort. More than \$20 billion of that would come from Liberty Bond drives.

Cranford held four Liberty Bond drives, and enlisted the aid of local Boy Scouts and other youth organizations to promote them, as well as the aid of prominent local citizens and businesses. Families contributing to all four drives received a “100%” placard to display in their windows.

By far the most successful Cranford Liberty Bond drive was the third. Cranford raised \$825,000, more than three times its quota and the highest amount raised by any Union County municipality. The success was celebrated April 6, 1918 - the one-year anniversary of America’s entry into the War.



Bond Drive Celebration Apr 6, 1918

The celebration was held at the small park at the conjunction of Miln and Eastman Streets, where a flagpole had just been erected with \$500 raised by the Men’s League for that purpose. Men’s League President Stewart presented the flagpole to Committeeman Tool, who accepted it on behalf of the mayor who was out of town. Patriotic speeches were given and music provided by the Plainfield Dutch Arms band and the Cranford Fire Department Fife and Drum Corps. (The flagpole stood for 85 years, when the Township would remove it to make way for a Victorian water fountain. It was unceremoniously deposited in the Conservation Center when the Township balked at the estimated \$30,000 - \$50,000 restoration costs. Once again citizens came to the rescue and raised the money for the flagpole to be reinstalled at Post Office Plaza in late 2008.)

The War Ends

WW I ended 11 AM (Paris time) November 11, 1918, although many Cranford servicemen remained in Europe as occupation troops well into 1919. On September 13, 1919, Cranford held a Welcome Home parade for its veterans.



Welcome Home Program

On page 72 of Images of America: Cranford Volume II can be found a group photo taken on the Cleveland School grounds of Cranford's medal-bedecked veterans in their Class A uniforms.

Final Thoughts

WW I was a horrifying and disruptive event for communities such as Cranford. The WWI plaque at Cranford's Memorial Park lists all 309 of its wartime service veterans – perhaps both a testament to the community's commitment, and also a testament to the naive belief in the uniqueness of the event. That belief was unable to survive, and in all Cranford memorials from WW II on, only Cranford's killed in action (KIA) servicemen are listed by name.

The number of Cranford servicemen and their accomplishments are too numerous to list them all in a brief article like this. I hope their families will understand this and that their sacrifices are truly appreciated by all the community.

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