MISSION
TO
NORTH RUSSIA

VFW members return to a distant battlefield to recover the remains of American soldiers who died in a forgotten campaign after WWI.

In the early spring of 1929, Commander-in-Chief Eugene Pendleton Carver, Jr., was approached by the Polar Bear Association in Detroit, Mich., and asked for VFW help in a strange and difficult mission.

The Polar Bears were survivors of a campaign that was little-known while it was being waged—and quickly forgotten afterward. That is, except by those Americans who had fought in the snows of Russia in a hopeless cause months after World War I.

Some 5,000 members of the 339th Infantry Regiment and attached units had been sent there by President Woodrow Wilson during the Russian Civil War supposedly to help secure Allied supplies, but actually to counter the Bolsheviks around Archangel. The mission lasted from September 1918 through June 1919.

The Association, formed in 1922, was uncomfortable with the knowledge that only about half of those who died in that alien and frozen wasteland had been brought home. The thought of sons and

By Herbert M. Mason, Jr.
brothers still lying under the soil of an atheist nation was a source of anguish to the dead men’s relatives.

To mount a search and recovery mission, Michigan Sen. Arthur H. Vandenberg secured $79,592 from Congress to add to the $15,000 appropriated by his state legislature. But there the project stalled. The U.S. had never recognized the Soviet Union, so the State Department could not help American citizens enter Communist Russia. The Polar Bears turned to the VFW as the only outfit willing and able to get the job done.

Carver knew it would be no easy task: northern Russia was thousands of miles away under a suspicious and politically fanatic dictatorship. But Carver, a lieutenant with the 5th and later the 56th Pioneer Infantry in France, relished the challenges. He and the rest of VFW were determined to bring home the first Americans to have fought Bolsheviks.

U.S. Army Graves Registration (GRS) had scoured the battlegrounds of Archangel Province until forced to leave in early 1920. Boxes with 105 remains were shipped home, but 114 graves were still scattered across the tundra. VFW was determined to account for as many of the original 232 lost Americans as possible.

To gain the organization entry into the Soviet Union, Carver, in 1929, approached Secretary of War Patrick J. Hurley, a logical move in that Hurley was a former national officer of the VFW. Despite Hurley’s Cabinet rank, Moscow turned him down.

Then Hurley and Carver tried another tack: They approached the Soviets as private citizens acting on behalf of a fraternal organization with no political affiliations. That did the trick, and the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics granted VFW the right to enter Soviet territory to fulfill its mission.

ODYSSEY TO ARCHANGEL
The chairman of the VFW National Legislative Committee, Edwin S. Bettelheim, Jr., volunteered to lead the recovery team soon assembled. Walter C. Dunion, John C. Evans, Michael Macalla, Roy Derham and Gilbert T. Silson, all Polar Bears from Lansing, Mich., joined Bettelheim’s small group of military archaeologists. Equipped with old campaign maps, they sailed from New York harbor on the first leg of what would become a 13,000-mile journey.

In France, they were joined by Paris Post 605 Commander Russell H. Dutcher and Capt. Stuart D. Campbell along with three experienced men of the GRS, all VFW members. They boarded a train and headed for Germany, pausing in gloomy Berlin only long enough to get aboard another train. It rocked its way through Poland and across the endless Russian steppes to put them in Moscow.

It was now the first week of August, and
the VFW search party had only until mid-October to finish its task. After that, the winter would close down operations. Its sub-zero horrors and deep frost would make digging almost impossible. The Polar Bears among them knew the Russians were not exaggerating. "Every possible aid was given us by the Russian officials," Bettelheim recalled. "Time was so short that we had to buy metal and construct the zinc coffins in Russia."

The Russians suggested the Americans pack away their good clothes, so obviously foreign, and outfit themselves in Russian peasant garb. This would prevent drawing attention to themselves while in the northern province. When outfitted in the native costumes, VFW members resembled the Bolshevik soldiers Doughboys had fought all those years ago. The expedition was attired in baggy pants and blouses, long coats with a belt around the middle, calf-length boots and fur caps. They boarded the train bound for Archangel 370 miles away.

Bettelheim divided the group into two teams that set off for the inhospitable wilderness. He remembered the tough going, a journey little less arduous than the campaign itself: "We traveled up the Divina, the Vaga, the Onega, the Penega and the Yemptze Rivers, along the rail-road fronts, through deep forests. We climbed cliffs, scrambled over sand dunes and waded knee-deep through marshes and swamps searching for bodies.

"We made our way up the rivers in wood-burning, flat-bottomed boats, drawing about a foot of water, a red-and-yellow VFW pennant flying from the mast. A number of times we slept on the banks of the river where we built bonfires—it was better to sleep on the banks of the river than it was to attempt to sleep in the vermin-infested houses in the villages or cramped in our small boat."

"We found remains in swamps, in deserted cemeteries along the line of our trenches that still remained in front yards of peasant houses, along the sides of cliffs, and some whose graves were covered with a forest of underbrush. In some instances we had to make two or three separate expeditions to the same locales, offering rewards to peasants before we could get any information as to where American soldiers might be lying."

Peasants often pointed to graves that when excavated revealed British remains. The grave would be refilled, and the team would move on to the next beat field, river bank or forest.

Ten years of alternating heat, rain and deep freeze left very little of the men underground. "Nothing remained," said Bettelheim, "but skeleton bones and the skull, with here and there small pieces of decayed flesh attached to joints. When we attempted to lift the uniforms, they would crumble in our hands or rip to pieces when we touched them."

Weeks of this grisly work proved too much for two of the expedition members: One simply disappeared for two weeks and returned without explanation; another stayed up all night singing hymns. One by one the remains were gathered, identification made from odds and ends—here a monogrammed cigarette case, there a class ring—because most of the dog tags had crumbled to rust colored dust. Two months of exhausting field work produced the remains of 86 American soldiers. The bones were washed in Lysol, wrapped in linen and placed in the zinc coffins.

On Oct. 27, the team boarded a Soviet steamer with the zinc boxes and sailed away from Leningrad. At the French port of Le Havre, the boxes were put inside regulation coffins, the excess space filled with blankets. A French military honor guard stood watch over the flag-draped caskets. A memorial service was held on Nov. 18, attended by French and U.S. of-
The train stopped in every city and town of any size in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan. Taps was played at each station even in the dead of night, the plaintive notes registering on silent crowds of citizens and VFW honor guards. Nothing like it had been seen since the train bearing the body of assassinated President Abraham Lincoln made its sad journey to Illinois in 1865.

DETROIT'S OWN

It made its last stop on Dec. 1, 1929, where thousands gathered in front of Detroit's Union Station under a steady fall of snow. Duff turned to the mayor, Fred W. Green, a VFW member from the Spanish-American War. "Mr. Mayor, the bodies of these heroes are now before you," he said. "They belong to the state of Michigan. The VFW is proud to have participated in this labor of love. The Polar Bears are home."

(However, 41 Amerikanski remained in Russia. Of those, 14 would be recovered by the GRS in 1934; 27 sets of American remains were never found.)

It was an experience Bettleheim never forgot. "As the mothers and fathers of these heroes stood silently in the bleak, snow-driven cold at Detroit, our responsibilities in discharging a most arduous task were again emphasized with a deeper and more penetrating significance," he said. "We forgot weeks of weary effort, seeing and thinking only of those bereaved, their prayers at last answered by the loyalty and energy of comrades who recognize their obligation to the memory of the nation's soldier dead as a sacred duty of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States."

"Crowds lined Ford Street, braving the snow and cold to pay tribute to the last remnants of the 85th Division [the 339th was part of it]," reported the New York Times. "After the City Hall ceremony, 3,500 members of veteran and allied organizations marched to Cass Park."

Citizens watched 56 flag-covered caskets loaded inside as many hearse for the slow drive to White Chapel Cemetery at Troy, outside the city. They were placed in a mausoleum known as the Temple of Memories to await Memorial Day 1930. On that spring morning, the soldiers who had traveled so far were laid to final rest, watched over by a defiant polar bear of white stone.

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