

Theodore Boal - They Died in France For Liberty By Joe Horvath



The Boal Troop in calvary formation, c. 1916

In the spring of 1916, with the European powers at war, an event was about to take place that had not been seen since the days of our Civil War. A militia unit was going to be recruited and mobilized for action. This was not to occur on some vast, isolated military base, but rather on a privately-owned family estate.

Nestled in Southern Centre County between the Tussey Mountain Range and Mount Nittany was the village of Springfield, first settled by the Scotch-Irish. A former captain in the Cumberland Militia during the Revolutionary War, David Boal made this area his home in 1789. The Boal family eventually established themselves as landed gentry, owning approximately 80 small farms and a tavern on the main road to Pittsburgh. A popular vote in 1820 changed the town name to Boalsburg to honor the prosperous family.

The story of the militia unit starts with Theodore Davis Boal. He was born in Iowa City, Iowa in 1867. An architect by training, Boal moved to Paris in the 1890s to study art. It was there that he met his wife, Mathilde Denis de Legarde, a niece of the family of Christopher Columbus. Boal returned to the States in 1898 with his wife and young son, Pierre. He purchased what was then called the “family farm” in Pennsylvania and settled into the life of an aristocrat.

In 1914, war broke out between the European Monarchies. President Wilson vowed to keep America neutral. The country, however, was becoming divided in its opinion on the war. A “Preparedness Movement” was sweeping the country. Boal was a believer in the movement. He and his son volunteered for service in France. Boal donated money and material to French hospitals and organized a number of military canteens for the troops in Calais and at the Belgian front while his son joined the French cavalry.

Upon his return home from France, Boal was convinced that America would soon be at war. Throughout the late winter and early spring of 1916, he laid the foundation for the formation of a horse-mounted machine gun troop that would fulfill a need within the Pennsylvania National Guard. On Friday, May 19, the original 33 members of what was to become the “Boal Troop” met at the mansion on the estate in Boalsburg to map out the details for the logistics and political maneuvering involved with the formation of a volunteer militia group.

Construction of Camp Boal on the eastern border of the estate began in the late spring of 1916. Initially, the National Guard was to supply everything but the horses. However, it soon became apparent that Boal was paying the lion's share of expenses by supplying quarters, rations, uniforms, and horses. The men trained without pay, yet enthusiasm and patriotism swelled the ranks. The troop roster listed 78 men. A good number were faculty, students, and employees from Penn State with a lesser number of merchants, machinists, clerks, craftsmen, and laborers from the tri-county area. The troop was rounded out by the enlistment of one farmer and one doctor identified as privates.

A series of inspections throughout that summer by the State Adjutant General and U.S. Army Regulars praised the troop as being fit for service. Boal was voted in as Captain of the troop with George Thompson and Wilbur Leitzel as the lieutenants. The "Boal Troop" was accepted by the National Guard and became the "Machine Gun Troop of the 1st PA Cavalry."

The first deployment of the Troop was to the Texas/Mexico border in October of 1916. The Troop was mustered into federal service as part of a larger U.S. Army/National Guard presence. This was the result from armed border incursions by Mexican revolutionaries led by Poncho Villa. The Troop returned to Camp Boal in January of 1917.

America entered World War I on April 6, 1917. Camp Boal was modified to include a mock-up of a front line trench for training purposes. (That trench system was located at the present-day stretch of Business Route 322 in front of the Pennsylvania Military Museum). By the late summer, several changes had taken place. The National Guard was re-designated as the 28th Infantry Division, Boal was promoted and transferred to division headquarters, and the Troop had grown to the battle strength of 172 men. The Troop was re-designated Company A of the 107th Machine Gun Battalion and left for the war with the 28th Division in mid-May of 1918.

By the time of the Armistice on November 11, 1918, twelve men from Company A were killed in action. The Troop returned with the division in May of 1919. In August, the first reunion of the 28th Division A.E.F. (American Expeditionary Force) was held at Camp Boal, where a monument was dedicated to the memory of the fallen troopers. A plaque reads, "This simple stone cross, found broken in the debris of an obliterated French village through which our troops passed, is erected to the memory of Hayes M. Wilson, Bromley R. Smith, Eugene R. Davis, Michael A. Miller, Donald J. Hile, Arthur Monroe, Ralph I. Dunlap, Claude K. Kahle, William C. Conway, Lewis Crosovalt, James Thorp, George Simcox. They died in France for liberty."

The memory of Camp Boal and the Troop has faded with time. It survived as an officers club and cavalry training site through the 1920s and early 30s, but an end to an era came to pass with the disbanding of the Troop in 1936 and Boal's death in 1938. However, the idea of yearly reunions and the dedication of memorials to fallen comrades did take hold and the result has been one of beauty, honor, and remembrance to this day.