



The Strange, Sad Death of Sergeant Kenney

GAZING calmly out of a large photograph, a sepia-colored oval in a plain bronze frame, all during my boyhood he stared imposingly down on me from the living room wall.

A seated figure wearing the khaki uniform of a World War I soldier, arms folded in martial fashion, proudly he posed at a three-quarters angle (the better to display his sergeant's stripes, I thought then). Easy good nature and the promise of ready laughter showed in his pleasant, almost handsome face, an impression confirmed by my mother's fond memories of him—"and a wonderful dancer!" she'd add. Yet for me the portrait held more sadness than joy. Ten years before I was born, that young soldier had died in the snows of North Russia, cut down by a Bolshevik machine gun. As he lay bleeding his life away, the war he'd been sent to fight had been over for six long weeks.

He was my uncle, my mother's brother. His name was Michael Kenney, "Mick," everyone called him. In 1917 he'd come over from County Sligo, Ireland, joining two sisters and a brother already here. The sisters were in New York City and the brother in Chicago, but Mick preferred Detroit, Michigan, where some cousins lived. That April America entered the war, and in September Mick, just turned twenty-five, enlisted in the 339th Infantry Regiment, "Detroit's Own," as it was fondly called. Assigned to K Company, Third Battalion, directly out of basic training he was promoted to sergeant and with the 339th promptly sent overseas, to the frozen wastes of North Russia. Soon the 339th had earned for itself the nickname "The Polar Bears."

In battle after battle in the dense, snow-clad forests, as my

Sgt. Michael Kenney of the 339th Infantry, known as the "Polar Bears," poses with his sister Ann (the author's mother). The photo was taken in a New York City studio in July 1918, days before the 339th shipped out for North Russia.

Courtesy of the author

A Personal Story of Heroism and Loss during America's Russian Intervention of 1918-19

By John Evangelist Walsh

mother often told me, Mick fought the Bolsheviks (an early name for the Communists), winning commendations and medals for his bravery. Then on November 11, 1918, came the Armistice, ending World War I. By the boatload the victorious Yanks came home, but not the 339th, which stayed on in Russia. It was on a cold, dark night in late December, at a little town whose name my mother never could recall, that Bolshevik bullets found Mick.

"He died on New Year's Eve," my mother would say mournfully, "but by then the war was over! We all thought he was safe. Then in January 1919 came the telegram. It said he'd been killed on New Year's Eve. How could that be?"

When eventually I began searching out my uncle's story, I wondered why the 339th had stayed in Russia and kept on fighting after the Armistice, why they'd gone there at all. In the very first source I checked—an obscure old book written by several of the 339th's officers—I found that my mother's claims about Mick's heroism were not just sisterly exaggeration.

Describing a Bolshevik attack on a town called Seletskoe, the book explained how "for two days and nights the Americans beat off the attacks, principally through the good work of Sgt. Michael Kenney, the gallant soldier who fell at Kodish on New Year's day." A few pages further on the fighting in December at Kodish is pictured, and again Mick is mentioned: "Sergeants Kenney and Grewe of K Company gave their lives that night in moving courageously among their men."¹

Often my mother had told us of an indignant letter written to the War Department by her brother in Chicago, Patrick. Complaining about a mix-up in the notification of Mick's death, it also pointedly asked how it was that an American soldier could have died in battle when the war was long over. At the National Archives in Washington, some fifty years after

it was written, I found that original, handwritten letter, neatly tucked into Mick's burial file. Clipped to it was a copy of the official typed reply apologizing for the mix-up. About the continued fighting in Russia, nothing is said.

I found many other documents detailing my uncle's military service, at the National Archives and also at the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library and at the Wisconsin Historical Society Archives. At the Bentley there turned up an especially valuable item, a diary kept by an officer in Mick's company who knew him well and who was nearby when he died. Several excellent books on the North Russian campaign gave me the necessary background, so that I now know the full story of my uncle's four-month's service in Russia. He was, it develops, along with hundreds of other young Americans, an unnecessary sacrifice to one of the most fumbling foreign policy actions in our history.

THE last time anyone of his family saw Mick before he went overseas was in July 1918, when he visited my mother in New York City. The 339th had been transferred from its original training base at Camp Custer, Michigan, to a staging area on Long Island, New York, to await transportation for England. On a weekend pass he came to bid goodbye to his sister and to his many Irish immigrant friends in the city. The only tangible relics of that final visit are the large oval photograph of Mick so familiar to me in my youth, made in a New York studio at my mother's insistence, and a second photo made that same day showing the two together.²

By mid-August he was gone, headed with his comrades for what all believed would be the battlefields of France. After two weeks in England, however, the 339th found itself bound not for France but for Russia's frozen north, as part of the Allied Intervention force.

In the summer of 1918 the Bolshevik revolution, then less than a year old, had succeeded in taking over most of Russia and had promptly altered the balance of forces engaged in the



According to John Cudaby, author of Archangel: The American War with Russia, "the campaign had already assumed a defensive character" by the time the Americans reached Archangel in September.

larger war. The old Russia had been one of the Allies, fighting against Germany. Now the Bolsheviks had changed all that, unexpectedly signing a separate peace treaty with Germany in March at Brest-Litovsk, taking Russia out of the war and freeing a horde of seasoned German troops to join the fighting on the Western front in France. By intervening, the Allies hoped to bring the old Russians back to power and reconstitute the Russian front. A few lesser reasons for intervention were also urged: deny Germany naval bases in a friendly country; preserve the huge supplies of scarce war matériel stocked at Archangel; rescue a troop of Czech soldiers apparently stranded in Central Russia.



WHS Archives, PH 4988, WHi(U621)164

No sooner did the 339th debark at Archangel on September 6, 1918, than it found itself in combat.

meant to please all sides, based on no clear-cut purpose or principle, it turned out to be the worst of his career. Reluctant to agree, unable to say no, he ended by doing both, and neither. The document in which he lays out his decision, the so-called *aide-memoire* presented to the Allied War Council, is a fairly shocking instrument, full of imprecision, obfuscation, and sheer contradiction. He would send a small force to Russia, he announced, some five thousand men (mostly from Michigan, with a few hundred from Wisconsin), all under British command. They were forbidden, though, to take part in any aggressive military action but were there simply to “guard” the military stores and to “help” the supposedly stranded Czechs. They could also help “steady” old Russian efforts at “self-government and self-defense” and “render such aid” as Russia might request, all to be done without further guidance from the president.

Strongly opposing intervention were equally determined voices. The Russians were thoroughly sick of the war, opponents charged, and would stay out of it no matter what happened. Further, plunging a small Allied force into the vast, densely wooded, snow-covered North Russian territories amounted to suicide. A million men would not be enough. The Bolsheviks, opponents also pointed out, were not the military bumbler the West thought, and their hold on the country was probably unbreakable. Finally, the chaotic economic and political situation in Russia doomed every sort of plan to uncertainty.

Facing this welter of cross-purposes, pressed to act by Britain and France, President Woodrow Wilson in the summer of 1918 made his fateful choice. Wholly a political decision

bat. Coming off the ship with arms and full packs, the men were put aboard trains and promptly parceled out along the sweeping four-hundred-mile curve of the Allied front lines. For the next ten months—until the Allies finally withdrew, their mission a failure—life for the men of the 339th was a painful blur: at one moment fierce fighting, attacking a succession of villages and towns in boggy forests, against a relentless, well-armed foe often ten or fifteen times their number, then tense lulls of inaction, all in impossible weather, frost and snow and muddy roads, and in daylight lasting at most three or four hours.

Mick’s outfit, K Company of the 339th’s Third Battalion, was assigned to what was called the Railroad Front, stretching south from Archangel along the ancient, narrow-gauge tracks.

Barely a week after coming ashore he was under fire at a village called Obozerskaya, where the Americans took their first casualties, three men killed and a dozen wounded. A few days later he was in his first full-blown battle, a week-long engagement at the village of Seletskoe, a straggle of log-built houses on the Emtsa River. Here he earned the first of his two medal citations for leadership and gallantry in action.

During a quiet moment before the start of the battle, while the men of K Company were sheltering behind snowbanks and fallen trees, platoon leader Lt. Charles Ryan and Mick were crouched down beside each other. As they waited they talked of the strange situation in which they found themselves and the battle to come. "It was hardly an hour for levity," Ryan later wrote in a letter to his wife, "and I don't think the sergeant meant it for such when he remarked 'I only want to get back to the States to vote for Bryan, because Bryan was right.'"³ (William Jennings Bryan, Wilson's Secretary of State, opposed America's entry into the war and had resigned his post in 1915 in protest of the administration's policies. He'd already lost three tries for the presidency, but another was being talked of.)

For each day of the battle of Seletskoe, Lt. Ryan made entries in his diary, providing a rare picture of the fighting. Mick he mentions once as having had a close call:

About 10 A.M. the alarm was sounded and we [attacked and] took over the system of outposts and trenches. Our cavalry patrol was driven in, one man killed. We did not know their strength. It is almost impossible to patrol the flanks on account of the swamps and dense woods. I had the support trench on our right flank. No sooner were we in there than the M.G. [machine guns] opened up.



Milwaukee Leader, P71-1619

By the time this editorial cartoon appeared in the socialist Milwaukee Leader on February 21, 1919, the war in Europe had been over for more than three months.

Sgt. Kenney with the left outpost was cut off. . . . About 2 P.M. a Bolshevik airplane circled around us, and a few moments later they opened up on us with their artillery. . . . We spent a most miserable night in the trenches without overcoats or eats or fires.⁴

Help was soon sent to Mick, and he and his men fought their way back to the main body. The rescue was managed only at a price, however: "We have one man missing," wrote the lieutenant, "Pvt. Staley, one of the men sent to Sgt. Kenney's aid." It was two days before word came on the missing man: "A patrol brought back information that Staley's body was found. He had been shot and bayoneted." After the battle, in the little Seletskoe cemetery Pvt. Staley was buried. "We stood at Parade Rest, the Captain said the funeral serv-

ice, then taps and we came back.”

How Mick and his small detachment happened to be cut off is made clear in the citation written up afterward:

On the 16th Sept 1918 he withheld a vigorous flank attack upon the village of Seletskoe. By his coolness of thought, energy and steadfastness in the direction of his detachment of 15 men, outnumbered tenfold, he prevented a movement and an attempt to occupy commanding ground by the enemy, the success of which would have been disastrous to the Allied troops then defending the village.⁵

Twenty miles from Seletskoe, also situated on the Emtsa River, was the town of Kodish. The focus of strategy for both sides because of its size and location, it would see more and fiercer fighting than any other battle site in North Russia, the two armies advancing and then retreating, only to advance again, and again retreat, each briefly occupying the hill-encircled site. “Kodish was the epitome of North Russia,” remembered Lt. John Cudahy, “bought with toiling effort, incredible privation and cruel losses, to be lost and won again time following time, in the bitterest winter days with moving heroism and a moral grandeur that at times reached a sublime estate.”⁶

With Seletskoe under Allied control, Kodish became the prime target. Cautiously, for three weeks the Allies edged their way through impossible terrain in that direction, slogging through thick, swampy forests and deep snow, less concerned about enemy fire than with getting enough to eat and finding warmth against the bitter cold. “Thursday at 9:30 we left Seletskoe,” wrote Lt. Ryan in his diary, “marched out with light packs and just ammunition carts. Our stuff is to follow in 6 hours . . . slept or tried to sleep in the wet grass without any blankets, raining all the time. About midnight our wagons came along with blanket rolls.”

Next day the company set out at five A.M., eating a break-



Map by Joel Heiman

fast of hardtack as it moved through the dense forest. Several miles short of Kodish, the company heard firing and soon “ran into something . . . a regular battle, there must be 1000 of them.” K Company promptly joined the fight and within minutes had suffered seven casualties, five men wounded and two killed (Lt. Charles Chappel and Sgt. John Agnew). That night was again spent sleeping on the wet ground, weapons handy.

An unexpected order directly from headquarters now instructed K Company to improvise rafts, cross the Emtsa River, and attack a Bolshevik position on the far bank. “This will be suicide,” noted Ryan mournfully, “as they are laying for us. The crossing is to be made at noon.” Hastily they threw together several rafts

from fallen or cut-down trees, but at the last moment another message arrived “ordering us to stand pat.” A two-day rest period followed, at a tiny village called Mejnovskaya, where “we immediately took possession of the half-dozen houses and dried out our blankets and equipment . . . spent the first warm night in a week alongside a fire and under a roof.” Here the bodies of Lt. Chappel and Sgt. Agnew were buried.

On October 11 came the first direct attack on Kodish, and here again Mick distinguished himself. In fact, according to an eyewitness, Captain Mike Donoghue, Kodish was taken by the Americans on that occasion largely because of Sgt. Kenney’s intrepid leadership. “The woods and swamps are so thick,” recorded Lt. Ryan of the battle’s start, “that we can’t see 20 feet ahead. Moved in squad column as best we could [and] about noon we struck a Bolsh outfit building houses. . . . We killed two of these birds and captured 20 more . . . formed a line along the road, it looks well dug in. . . . Just at dark about 5 P.M. they attacked our flank. We had no machine guns but 15 rifles stood them off, looked bad for a few minutes.”

In that entry Mick is not mentioned, but as the official citation states, he was in the thick of that flank attack: “The energy and dash of his detachment of grenadiers, due to his

keenness, bravery, and coolness under the most hazardous conditions, was largely responsible for the success of the Allied force in the attack and capture of the village of Kodish on Oct. 12th and 13th, 1918.”⁷ At the bottom of the citation a handwritten note is added: “I was a witness to the above. Capt. Michael J. Donoghue.” (Donoghue himself was to gain medals and promotions for his role at Kodish.)

The men of K Company were spared the latter stages of the bloody, seesaw campaign at Kodish when they were sent to the rear for much-needed R&R, two weeks of hot food and soft beds at Archangel. They were still there when on November 11, 1918, the Armistice in Europe was proclaimed, bringing an end to World War I. Joyously the crowded city gave itself up to celebration as church bells rang and solemn services of thanksgiving were attended by grateful thousands.

The war was over! For the men of K Company, for everyone, there would be no more fighting, nor more dying.

EVERY winter for about four months the port of Archangel, ninety miles south of the Arctic Circle, becomes icebound as parts of the White Sea freeze solid. From late December to May no vessel can get in or out, not even the largest and most powerful. That fact, known to every soldier in the 339th, raised troubling questions. What would happen, they asked anxiously, now that with the war’s end they were no longer needed in Russia? Would the November Armistice allow them to depart before the December freeze? Afterwards, until the breakup of the ice, there would be no simple or safe way out. An exit overland by train and truck from the vast isolated rural north could be managed only with the greatest difficulty, and not without the consent and cooperation of the Bolsheviks.

That consent was never granted, never sought. The blind confusion that had created the Russian intervention still operated. Withdrawal of the Allied troops was not even attempted. The fighting and the dying went on. Eight decades later no one can be sure exactly why.

Still in existence is a letter written by an officer of the 339th, Capt. Robert Boyd, and sent through channels to the American ambassador. Bluntly asking “Why are we here?”, Boyd writes boldly:

One question which is asked by the intelligent enlisted man, and I ask it of myself. . . . While a state of war existed with Germany our mission, ostensibly at least, was to create an eastern front against Germany by developing a new Russian army. That state of war is now over, and I have always thought it one of our national policies that



the settlement of internal dissensions in a foreign country, if not interfering with our national rights, was inherent with their power of self-government. If that is the case, what moral justification have the Allied forces, and particularly our own, in Russia since the cessation of hostilities? If it is not the case, what is our national policy here?

There has been no open dissatisfaction, the men have gone through hardships and fighting cheerfully, but will soon begin to say among themselves, “why are we here.” It is my business to answer that question and I cannot.⁸

The letter reached the desk of General Finlayson, Chief of Staff, who routed it to Col. Stewart, 339th Commander. “I agree with him,” Stewart noted approvingly, “in feeling that it would ease men’s minds & make them fight better & more readily if they could read an authoritative statement of fact, which would put them wholeheartedly anti-Bolshevik.”

Three weeks later the American ambassador to Russia gave a talk to the 339th’s officers, making matters just a bit plainer: “You men want to know what you are doing here. You are protecting one spot in Russia from the sanguinary Bedlam of Bolshevism. You are keeping safe one spot where the real pro-



WHS Archives, PH 4988, WHi(U622)43

These sleighs, pulled by reindeer or Arctic ponies, supplied the troops on the front and when needed evacuated the wounded from battle.

On February 24, 1919, Lt. John A. Commons, son of University of Wisconsin labor historian and political economist John R. Commons of Madison, wrote in a letter to his parents: "The awful little wooden-axled drosbkys have now given way to the funny as well as little sleighs. It is surprising how far and how long the little horses can go, even in the coldest weather."

gressives of the Russian Revolution may begin to lay the foundation of the great free Russian state which is to come." In a weak effort at encouragement he added: "Don't think you are forgotten. Washington knows what you are doing, what you are up against. You may be sure that the President has thought of you, and in good time will tell you and the rest of us what he expects."⁹

In other words, the Allies were to stay on in Russia and help rid the country of its Red oppressors, a far cry indeed from the expedition's original intent. Wilson sent American soldiers to Russia to guard military stores, to tie up German soldiers, and to "steady" the old Russian government. Aggressive military action was explicitly forbidden. Now, well after fighting elsewhere in the world had ceased, they were being asked to fight against an entrenched Bolshevik regime. Seeing Bolshevism as a dire threat, the Allies feared it would spread to Western

Europe and even to the United States. The 339th had been drawn into America's first, if undeclared, anticommunist crusade.

By now, more than a month since the Armistice, there was serious grumbling in the ranks, a fact quickly picked up by American newspaper correspondents. The U.S. troops in North Russia, commented the *New York Times* on December 29, "are ready to carry out the wishes of the President, but marooned out here in some peasant villages, with only vistas of the snow-covered pine forests on all sides for endless miles, and with the world at peace, they are becoming a bit discouraged and lonely. They feel that they have been side-tracked . . . and forgotten. Our soldiers here as well as the Russian people would like a clear statement, and then some definite action."¹⁰

That same day, under a blaring headline—"Rescue Boys in Russia, Is State's Plea"—the *Detroit Free Press* reported that several Michigan organizations, including the War Preparedness Board, "made what is virtually a demand on the government today to withdraw the forces now battling against the Red Guards at odds of 15 to 1. . . . A rescue ship could get through the ice, with the help of ice-breakers, before Archangel is entirely isolated, which will be about January 15th." Chillingly the story added that, as soon as they were wholly cut off, "the Reds have threatened to massacre the Allies," then beyond all hope of reinforcement.¹¹

In Detroit a mass meeting was called, and hundreds of telegrams went to Michigan's senators and congressmen in Washington, urging that something be done. "For heaven's sake get action on the 339th Infantry rescue in Russia," begged one wire quoted by the *Free Press*, "cut the red tape, smash the ice, and get the boys out."¹²

The anxious head of the War Preparedness Board, as quoted in the *New York Times*, admitted that every day he received "hundreds of letters and telegrams from the thousands of parents and friends in Michigan of these soldiers, who feel that their boys and their husbands are in that godforsaken country practically lost, so far as the United States is concerned."¹³

In the U.S. Senate chamber, Wisconsin's Robert La Follette announced his strong opposition: "No reasons have ever been advanced to this body as to why we should go to war with Russia." Michigan's senator Charles Townsend paid a call on the Army's Chief of Staff, Gen. P. C. March, and was told that "the matter was entirely out of the control of the War Department." President Wilson, then in Paris, March explained, would bring up the question of Russia at the Peace Conference: "Meanwhile the boys must stay there at his pleasure. We

A Land of Extremes

Wisconsin and World War I

WISCONSIN citizens held a wide array of opinions about American participation in the Great War. The state was home for two of the country's most prominent opponents of the war, a large German immigrant population with strong ties to their homeland, and a cadre of hyperpatriots intent on proving Wisconsin's loyalty to the rest of the nation.

When war broke out in Europe in 1914, the United States tried to maintain its neutrality. As the conflict intensified, however, commercial ties to the Allies drew the country ever closer to war. Wisconsin's most prominent politician, Senator Robert La Follette, quickly established himself as a leader of the campaign to keep the country out of war. La Follette believed that the United States had to stay out of the European conflict. According to La Follette, the people who stood to gain the most from American involvement were the bankers who had loaned millions to the Allies and the munitions manufacturers who had provided them supplies. La Follette was also concerned that American participation in the war would take momentum away from his own cause—furthering political reform. Behind all this was the unshakable belief that the war was fundamentally undemocratic: the majority of Americans opposed it, and intervention would merely be aiding one monarchy against another.

La Follette voiced these ideas on the Senate floor. In March 1917, when President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for authority to arm American merchant ships to protect them from German submarine attack, La Follette successfully led a filibuster that prevented the measure from coming to a vote. His actions provoked death threats, and he even carried a revolver to the Capitol for his own protection. Congress adjourned at noon on March 4 and did not return until a special session in April, called by Wilson. Wilson vilified La Follette for his actions, calling him one of "a little group of willful men, representing no opinion but their own, [who] have rendered the great Government of the United States helpless and contemptible." On April 2 Wilson asked for a declaration of war against Germany, and La Follette was one of six senators to vote against the war resolution. On April 4 La Follette declared: "I believe that this war, like nearly all others, originated in the selfish ambition and cruel greed of a comparatively few men in each Government who saw in war an opportunity for profit and power for themselves, and who were wholly indifferent to the awful suffering they knew that war would bring to the masses." Nine of the eleven Wisconsin representatives in the House also voted against the war. His vote on the war made him one of the most hated men in the country, but in 1922 an overwhelming majority reelected him to the Senate.

Wisconsin socialists joined La Follette in opposing American involvement. Socialists had a well-formulated theory about the causes of the war. They believed that the European conflict was the inevitable result of the expansion of capitalist economies; they opposed the war as one driven by the competition for markets and resources, at the expense of the working class. Victor Berger, editor of Milwaukee's socialist daily, the *Leader*, became Wisconsin's most outspoken socialist critic of the war. He wrote frequent editorials in his paper protesting American participation in the war and denouncing it as a ploy by capitalists to make money in the war industries. "This is the time," charged Berger, "when the Congress of the United States is simply a rubber stamp of Mr. Woodrow Wilson and of the Wall Street Clique that is behind Wilson and directs his actions."

Berger's loud and repeated protest of the war brought him into conflict with the government's "loyalty campaign"—a series of acts and policies designed to curb dissent. The most famous of these laws was the Espionage Act of 1917, which made public criticism of the war a criminal act. In September 1917, the Milwaukee *Leader* was charged with violating the law, and its second-class mailing privileges were revoked; the newspaper could no longer be sent through the mail. In February 1918, Berger and four other socialists were charged with conspiring to break the Espionage Act and with writing and circulating seditious and pro-German literature. The case came to trial later that year; Berger was convicted and sentenced to twenty years in prison. Berger appealed his conviction to the United States Supreme Court, charging that the judge had been biased from the start of the trial. The Supreme Court overturned the conviction in 1921.

When Victor Berger won a seat in the House of Representatives from Wisconsin's Fifth District in 1918, his opinions became even more significant. The House refused to seat him, however, because of his antiwar stance and his recent conviction. Berger was unapologetic for his views: "I have nothing to retract from the articles that I have written or from the speeches that I have made. . . . This incident of being found guilty . . . for exercising my constitutional right of free speech and a free press should have nothing to do, however, with my being seated in the house of representatives." Still, the House voted not to allow Berger his seat. In 1919 the residents of the Fifth District reelected Berger in a special election, but the House again refused him the seat. The House finally agreed to seat him after his third election victory in 1922.

La Follette and Berger had much support in Wisconsin for

For an Early, General and Lasting
PEACE *(Of the Russian kind)*
 Tax the Profiteers

Victor L.
Berger

for
U. S. Senator
Socialist Ticket

For Free Speech
 Against Race Hatred

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Before Milwaukee Leader editor Victor L. Berger was elected to serve in the House of Representatives in the fall of 1918, he ran that spring in a special election for senator on an antiwar platform. Loyalty was the dominant issue in this election, and this campaign poster, altered by the addition of the Kaiser's mustache and a Prussian helmet, reflects the extremes of opinion that existed in Wisconsin during the war.

their antiwar positions. Although most of the faculty signed a letter opposing La Follette's position, the University of Wisconsin campus, led by intellectuals who opposed any war as a breakdown of civility inappropriate for the modern era, developed into an early center for the pacifist movement. The heart of Wisconsin's opposition to the war, however, lay in the state's German heritage. Seven hundred thousand of Wisconsin's 2.3 million residents traced their ancestry to Germany, and many of them held conflicting opinions about the war. They strongly supported President Wilson's initial position of neutrality and continued to advocate neutrality as the country drew closer to war. German Americans found themselves trapped between a cultural affiliation with their ancestral homeland and a continued allegiance to their new home.

In part because of the state's national reputation as an antiwar stronghold, some Wisconsin residents loudly denounced anyone who opposed the war—La Follette, Berger, the socialists, and German Americans—as disloyal and potentially dangerous. Organizations such as the Wisconsin Defense League

and the Wisconsin Loyalty Legion circulated pamphlets detailing German wrongdoing, promoted patriotic speeches, and issued pledges and petitions designed to ensure support for the war effort and counter Wisconsin's disloyal image. "The time has now come," one circular read, "when a decided stand must be taken to offset the work of the anti-American party, who under the guise of 'peace' meetings are spreading dissention [sic] and disloyalty in all parts of the state." People who refused to sign petitions, purchase war bonds, or support the loyalty campaign risked placing their own loyalty in doubt. Occasionally, loyalty campaigns degenerated into acts of vigilante violence. For example, residents of Ashland County held tar-and-feather parties that targeted those suspected of opposing the war, and a Rock County mob smeared yellow paint on at least one man who refused to purchase a Liberty Loan bond to finance the war. Although events like these represented the attitude of hyperpatriots, they illustrate one extreme of the range of opinions held by Wisconsin citizens about the American role in World War I.



Lt. John Cudaby, on the far left, leads this snowshoe patrol. In Archangel, he wrote: "The customary patrol was one that went out every day, a band of three or four, along a trail of padded snow just wide enough for single file. . . . It was like a game runway that leads to a salt lick, fresh signs show that deer pass every day, and it is only a question of time until the hunter gets his chance for the fatal shot."

are absolutely at the mercy of the President and Great Britain, and they do not tell us anything."¹⁴

“THIS was the coldest day that I ever experienced,” wrote Lt. Ryan in his diary while sitting in a hut in Obozerskaya on December

22. Since temperatures of twenty, even thirty below were not uncommon for a North Russian winter, on that day the mercury must have touched nearly forty below. It was later that same day that K Company received orders that the “big push,” rumored for weeks, was on, and a disgusted Lt. Ryan took due note of it: “The dope is out. We are to make another



WHS Archives, PH Series 1704

er advance [on Kodish]. The same old stuff. We made it once, got chased back, and now we are to try it again.”

The start of the offensive was set for December 30. At six o'clock that morning mortar fire and small artillery would open up on Kodish. Advance of the infantry would begin about a half-hour later. Estimates put the number of Bolshevik defenders then in the town at some three thousand. The Allies, led by the 339th's K, L, and E Companies, mustered barely five hundred.

Sorely conscious of what was coming, the men of K Com-

pany did their best to lose themselves in the Christmas season, Lt. Ryan readily joining in. But his diary entry for the day shows how hard it was to forget. “Christmas Day. My first one away from home . . . a gloomy day for me. . . . At 4 o'clock we had dinner of roast beef and two Rabchicks [a Russian fowl] that we got hold of, some canned apricots. Made a fair meal of it, but nothing like what they are having in Detroit and Bay City (would that I were there today).”

Early on the night of the twenty-ninth, K, L, and E Companies moved quietly into position before Kodish, then spent miserable, fireless hours waiting in the snow. It was still dark when the artillery opened up at 6 A.M., so that the skies were made lurid by the flashes of the big guns and the resulting explosions and fires that flared in the town. A half-hour later the three companies began moving forward. Their orders were to take Kodish, then push on to take the small nearby village of Avda. It was expected that by noon on the thirtieth, when the skies would have lightened, both Kodish and Avda would be subdued.¹⁵

It wasn't that easy. In Kodish the Bolsheviks, though heavily pounded, held on. Daylight came and went and it was dark again before they gave ground. Not until five or six that evening did Kodish fall, and not for another hour or so did the push to Avda start. When it did, Sgt. Kenney was among its leaders as units of K Company fought their way along the road leading south out of Kodish. It was almost midnight when his detachment halted for a brief rest in the snow, and he went the rounds encouraging the men, weary after some eighteen hours of almost continuous fighting. A quick skirmish at Avda, he told them, and they'd have houses to sleep in and warm fires.

A burst of machine gun fire tore through the darkness. Hit in the neck and chest, Mick crumpled into the snow. When the deadly chatter of the Bolshevik gun ceased, two men crawled through the drifts to his side and found him still alive. They dragged him back to the shelter of a building beside the road, where they stretched him on the floor in front of a cold fireplace. A medic hurried in and began working on him and on several other wounded men lying in a bloody sprawl.

One of the men who helped bring Mick in, Corp. Fred Kooyers, also kept a diary. In it he briefly records the frantic efforts made that night outside Kodish to rescue the wounded. “We got into a church,” he wrote, “which we made into a hospital while we were there, and got these men taken care of, when 1st Sgt. Comstock of Co. E came to us for some men to take care of the wounded. We got out on the front line and got four men that were badly wounded and carried them back to our hospital.” One of the four was almost certainly Mick.¹⁶

Two hours later an exhausted Lt. Ryan came to the church to check on his wounded. After a look at each man, offering sympathy and encouragement, he sat down to gain a few moments' rest, pulling out his little diary. "We had an awful time," he wrote, "have had about 35 wounded and many killed. Lt. Berger and Sgt. Kenney are dead. Sgt. Coulter is wounded. Held here all night in the snow."

The soldier who afterwards spoke to my mother said that for a while Mick stayed conscious and could talk, but said little. At about three in the morning on New Year's Eve he whispered some words that sounded like "Happy New Year." Then he closed his eyes and died. Ten days later his coffin was lowered into a grave in the Allied cemetery at Archangel.

In June 1919 the Allied withdrawal from North Russia began. That November Mick's body came back along with dozens of others aboard the SS *Lake Daraga*. Burial in Washington's Arlington Cemetery was offered, but my mother didn't want her beloved brother, the first of the six Kenney children to die, lying in some far-off plot of ground among strangers. He would be laid to rest in New York's Calvary Cemetery, where she could personally tend the grave.

The wake, with the coffin closed, was held in mid-November at Boyle's Funeral Home on Lexington Avenue, drawing many of Mick's old friends from Ireland to pay their last respects. One of these, also a young man from County Sligo, had lived near the Kenney family in Ireland and had known all of them well. His name was Thomas Walsh. At the wake he renewed his acquaintance with Mick's sister Ann. Not quite three years later they were married.

Now they too are gone, and their son, this writer, lovingly dedicates to them the memories—infinately sad, yet with some softer tinge of inspiration, I believe—preserved in these pages. ❖

¹ Joel Moore, Harry Mead, and Lewis Jahns, *The History of the American Expedition Fighting the Bolsheviks*, pp. 56, 129.

² The oval portrait still exists, but the sepia coloring has darkened considerably so that Mick's seated figure is now barely discernible. All my promises to myself years ago to get copies made went for nothing, I'm ashamed to say. A family member owned a copy of the second photograph made that day in 1918. It appears at the opening of this article.

³ Charles Ryan to Mrs. Charles Ryan, November 6, 1918, C. B. Ryan Papers, Bentley Library, University of Michigan. The North Russian collection at the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, is described in Doolen, *Michigan's Polar Bears*.

⁴ C. B. Ryan diary, Ryan Papers.

⁵ Quoted from the original typed citation, dated November 22, 1918, in the National Archives, Record Group 120. A finding-aid pamphlet published by the National Archives offers easy access to its manuscript holdings on Intervention: *Historical Files of the American Expeditionary Forces in Siberia, 1918–1920*. The entire North Russian collection is available on microfilm.

⁶ John Cudahy, *Archangel*, 121. A son of Patrick Cudahy of the famous Milwaukee meat-packing house, Cudahy returned safely from Russia, having seen much fierce fighting.

⁷ National Archives, Record Group 120 (the same single-page document that contains Mick's Seletskoe citation). His 201 personnel file was lost along with millions of others in a fire at the Army Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1973, so it can't be said just what medals were awarded. Family tradition says that after Kodish he was put in for promotion to captain, a move his death forestalled.

⁸ Quoted from the original letter, dated December 13, 1918, in the National Archives, Record Group 120. With Boyd's letter are the notes of General Finlayson and Col. Stewart.

⁹ E. M. Halliday, *The Ignorant Armies*, 92.

¹⁰ *New York Times*, December 29, 1918.

¹¹ *Detroit Free Press*, December 29, 1918.

¹² *Ibid.* December 30, 1918.

¹³ *New York Times*, December 31, 1918.

¹⁴ *Detroit Free Press*, December 31, 1918.

¹⁵ For the battle of Kodish, in addition to printed sources listed here in Resources and Further Reading, I have used reports by Capt. Mike Donoghue (then Major), Capt. E. Prince, and Lt. John Baker, originals in the National Archives, Record Group 120.

¹⁶ The Kooyers diary is in the George Albers Papers, Bentley Historical Library, Univ. of Michigan. Army records show that Sgt. George Comstock, of Detroit, was decorated for saving wounded at Kodish under intense enemy fire on Dec. 30–31. Twice he went forward alone under heavy fire, "in snow from knee to waist deep," to bring back a man (National Archives, Record Group 120). It is possible that Mick was one of these.

Resources and Further Reading

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The Wisconsin Historical Society Archives holds several collections relating to the role of Wisconsin soldiers in the Archangel campaign. The most comprehensive of these are the papers of the Wisconsin War History Commission, which include a history of the role of Wisconsin in the Great War, records of Wisconsin soldiers who served in Russia and elsewhere, and clippings files that reveal how Wisconsin newspapers covered the war. There are also several collections of letters, including the William F. Whyte papers and the Clarence J. Primm letters. Two of the best collections of photographs include those taken by Wisconsin native R. C. Johnson, photo lot 4988, and those taken by the U.S. Signal Corps and collected by the Wisconsin War History Commission, Archives PH Series 1704.

The Author



John Evangelist Walsh, who explains that he is not a historian but "a writer whose subject happens to be history," is author of seventeen books and many articles. His 1993 volume, *The Shadows Rise*, was a finalist for the annual \$50,000 Lincoln Prize. His 1969 book, *Poe the Detective*, won an Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America, and two of his most recent books were similarly nominated. In September this year his book *The Execution of Major Andre* appeared, offering a revisionist view of the familiar story of the British officer hanged for his part in Benedict Arnold's treason. Father of four, grandfather of three, he lives with his wife, Dorothy, in Monroe.

Wisconsin in the Midnight War

(Editor's note: Wisconsin soldiers and their families were an important part of the story of the 339th Infantry Regiment during the Russian Intervention of 1918–19, as the following images from the Society Archives and quotations from John Cudahy's Archangel reflect.)



WHS Archives, PH 4988, WHi(U621)65

Lieutenant Robert Colton Johnson, adjutant and chief photographer for the Engineer Corps serving in Archangel, donated a large collection of his photographs of this campaign to the Wisconsin Historical Society in 1957. Johnson grew up in Madison and attended the University of Wisconsin College of Engineering.



WHS Archives, PH 3757

Lt. John A. Commons (right) celebrates Christmas 1917 with his family. Nine months later, when stationed in North Russia, he wrote home: "Still going strong. We are in the throes of the rainy season, and a hundred percent season it is, too. Indeed, this country, which is perfect 7th heaven for antedated and defunct swamps, and morasses, is supersaturated now. It is on the average knee-deep anywhere off a road, and the mud on the road covers one's ordinary shoe-tops."

"In a few crowded weeks, so many stirring events had thronged their heretofore placid lives that these recruits from Michigan and Wisconsin were buried beneath a bewildering wilderness of amazing impressions through which confused, alien scenes and persons and places trooped in phantom and fantastic multicolored parade, until their minds were stunned beyond the power of further perception."

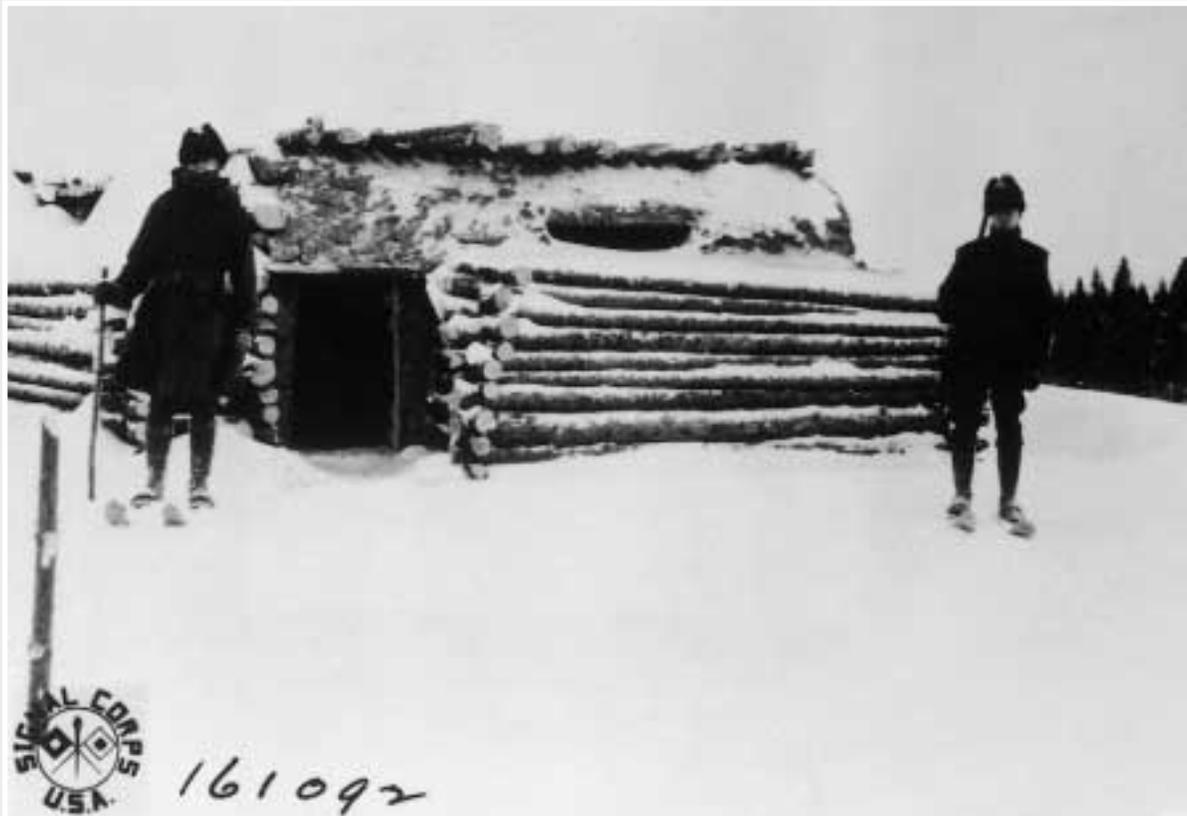
Lt. Edmond Richard Collins from Racine died of wounds received in the battle fought near Bolsheozkerki, Russia, on March 29, 1919, more than four months after Armistice Day.

WHS Archives, PH Series 1704



“The High Command passed out word that Arctic conditions would preclude any active fighting, but the prisoners spoke differently. They said that the Bolshevik Staff expected the Allied soldier to die like flies in the cold winter, that the enemy intended to strike when the cold was most bitter, the snow deepest, and so they did.”

Below: The men of Company D and Company B, 339th Infantry, constructed this blockhouse on the south bank of the Dvina river for the protection of the village of Chamova. On the left is Lt. John Cudaby, a scion of the famous meat-packing family. Though Cudaby was a leader of the Wisconsin Defense League, an organization devoted to supporting the American war effort and opposing the pacifist influence of Robert M. La Follette and Victor Berger, his book, Archangel: America's War with Russia, is an impassioned account of the Russian Intervention and his disagreement with the policy that brought it about. The photograph was taken on December 31, 1918, the day that Sgt. Michael Kenney was killed near Kodish.





WHS Archives, PH Series 1704



WHS Archives, PH Series 1704

Lt. Marcus T. Casey bailed from New Richmond and was the first American soldier to die on Russian soil during the mission, a victim of pneumonia. The photo of the funeral procession was taken in Archangel, Russia, on September 18, 1918.



WHS Archives, PH Series 1704



WHS Archives, PH Series 1704

Above left: Lt. Marcus T. Casey was nearing the end of his third year of law school at the University of Wisconsin when the United States entered the war. Above right: Capt. Joel R. Moore from La Crosse served in Company M, 339th Infantry. He is one of the authors of The History of the American Expedition Fighting the Bolsheviki; Campaigning in North Russia, 1918–1919 (1920), and his papers are part of the Polar Bear Expedition Collections in the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library. Left: Captain Horatio G. Winslow of Madison stands in front of Company I of the 339th Infantry in preparation for eight of its members receiving the French Croix de Guerre on February 17, 1919.



WHS Archives, Name File

Malcolm K. Whyte of Madison (right) poses with his mother and father before embarking for Archangel. Whyte was an engineer and served in Russia with his college friend Robert Colton Johnson. His father, William F. Whyte, served as a doctor and was discharged on November 3, 1918. In a letter to his family dated December 23, 1918, Malcolm wrote: "The temperature has dropped down to Zero and the Russians are looking at us curiously, wondering if we will be able to stand it."