

Washington Artillery

A Saga of Volleys and Balls

By Charles McCain



Lithograph of the Washington Artillery

They fought in every major battle of the Civil War, chased Pancho Villa in Mexico, tried to make the Kaiser dance in World War I, and shot it out with Hitler's finest in World War II. They are Louisiana's oldest military unit and they celebrate their 143rd anniversary this month. The Pentagon calls them the 141st Field Artillery but we know them as New Orleans' own Washington Artillery.

"The greatest thing that ever happened to me is to go down in history as one of the commanders of the Washington Artillery," says Lt. Col. Russell Mayeur, immediate past commanding officer of the 407-man battalion. Mayeur, a native New Orleanian, rose from private to become commander of the unit. The Artillery, part of Louisiana's National Guard, is a front line combat unit composed of men from the New Orleans metropolitan area.

Organized in September of 1838, the battalion was originally composed of socially prominent New Orleanians. In the 19th century, military units were centers of social life as well as military drill. Indeed the Washington Artillery was, at times, more famous for its lavish balls than its military prowess. But during the Mexican War of 1848 the unit was sent to Mexico and the cannons showed they could fight as well as dance.

Between the Mexican War and the Civil War the Artillery gave parties and built a new armory at 719 Girod St. between St. Charles and Carondelet streets. But this idyll was interrupted by the Southern attack on Fort Sumter. On Sunday morning, May 26, 1861, the Artillery filed into Lafayette Square. A gray-clad officer of the new country stood before them and mustered the unit into the Confederate Army. Then they went to church.

In June of 1861, the Artillery, comprising four companies, was dispatched to Richmond, Va. "Since their arrival here (Richmond) they have been the life and soul of the city, and the admiration of all who have seen them at their morning and evening parades," wrote the correspondent of *The Daily Picayune*. But the Yankees began to advance on Richmond and the Artillery was sent up to join the rest of the Confederate Army. The Rebs and the Yanks collided near a stream named Bull Run and fought the First Battle of Bull Run or First Mannassas. This was the first battle of the Civil War and New Orleans' own Washington Artillery fired the opening cannon. "For intrepidity, and accuracy and rapidity of fire, they will stand as a proverb throughout our land," said *The Richmond Enquirer* of the Washington Artillery after the battle. And *The Daily Picayune* informs us that Gen. Beauregard, who also fought in the battle, spoke of the Artillery "in terms of the highest eulogium."

With so much glory being won by the Artillery, other young men were eager to join so a fifth company was recruited. According to *The Sunday Delta*, this company "embraced the picked young men of our city." These "picked young men" enlisted just in time to see action in the bloody battle of Shiloh. *The Daily True Delta* sadly informs us that a number of them were killed at Shiloh "while at their posts like men."

Back in Virginia the original group, now a unit of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, continued to fire away at the Yankees. Though the cannoneers could endure the taunts of Union soldiers, they could not abide inappropriate remarks from their fellows. After the battle of Fredericksburg, two members of the Artillery engaged in an affair of honor. The two duelists, according to *The Daily Picayune*, "fought with horse pistols at 20 paces." Fortunately for the cause they both missed.



Washington Artillery before the Battle of Shiloh

The two units of the Washington Artillery fought in almost every major engagement of the War for Southern Independence including the battles of Antietam, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Chickamauga, and the Wilderness. After the South surrendered, the soldiers of the Artillery made their separate ways back to the Crescent City. Out of the 808 men who served with the Artillery, 139 died in the war.



Washington Artillery cannoneers in action

Prohibited by the carpetbagger government from reconstituting themselves, and their arsenal having been mysteriously burned, the Artillery survived only as a benevolent association in the 10 years following the Civil War. But the Reconstruction government was finally thrown out, and in 1875 the unit was reorganized. "A Dress and military ball at St. Patrick's Hall" marked the occasion, according to the *New Orleans Democrat*.

The Artillery passed the remaining years of the 19th century with excursions to Biloxi and fancy dress balls. In 1898, however, this routine was interrupted by the Spanish-American War. The Federal Army called on the Artillery to furnish a battery of guns. When the men marched off to war they were ready to kill Spaniards and "prepared to lick any regimental or military baseball team in the country." Indeed, continued *The Daily States*, the Washington Artillery was "going to toss balls with the Spaniards, and if they can't beat them at that they will challenge them to a game of catching." But peace was declared before the Artillery left the country and the cannoneers never played "catching" with the Spaniards.

Because of the trouble with Pancho Villa on the Mexican border, the artillery was called to colors for seven months in 1917. According to *The New Orleans Item*, the only serious trouble the unit encountered was when a "lone Mexican, probably a bandit," stole into the Artillery's camp on the Rio Grande. The soldiers chased the bandit away. The artillerymen were more concerned with Mexican heat than Mexican bandits. *The New Orleans Item* printed appeals from the cannoneers to the citizens of our city asking them to raise money for a "lounging tent." This tent was needed to "provide a place for the soldiers to rest during the hours from 11 am until 6 pm when the heat is so intense that drilling is impossible."



Washington Artillery's Motto

Soon after the artillerymen recovered from their Mexican holiday, they were called up to help make the Kaiser dance. The cannoneers went to France but the armistice was signed before they saw action. The soldiers found France a pleasant place with no Germans shooting at them. Their commander, Maj. Owen, wrote to a friend in New Orleans, "having a perfectly beautiful time. France wonderful. 'We won't come back til it's over, over here.'"

But the war to end all wars didn't and when the United States went into World War II, the always-ready Washington Artillery was ordered to active duty. Two battalions, the 141st and the 935th, were created to serve for the duration. Both battalions were shipped to Europe in 1943 and saw action in the Italian Campaign. The 141st battalion was the first American artillery unit to enter Rome. After Rome was liberated, both units were sent to France, as part of the Allied Armies, they participated in the great land offensives which crushed the Nazi regime. When the Germans surrendered, both battalions of the Artillery were deep in German territory. The unit has not been ordered to active duty since World War II.

"Try us," is the motto of our Washington Artillery. When tried they never fail. What was said of them in the Civil War is true for all their history: "Steady and reliable, ever at their post, the cannoneers of the Washington Artillery were soon distinguished for discipline and brilliant marksmanship, and, where quick and telling work was to be done, they were sent by all commanding generals..."



141st Field Artillery Insignia

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