



Send the Alabamians: World War I Fighters in the Rainbow Division

by Nimrod T. Frazer.

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We need a book like this for every World War I infantry regiment.¹ Nimrod Frazer provides a thoughtful account of the US Army's 167th Infantry Regiment in the famous 42nd Infantry Division (known as the "Rainbow" Division, because it pooled men from around the country to fight in the Great War). A retired investment banker and Alabama native, Frazer is uniquely well suited to write this story. His father, William J. Frazer, served with the 167th and received a Purple Heart for wounds sustained at the Croix Rouge Farm battle in 1918. The author himself served with distinction in the 167th in Korea, receiving a Silver Star. He spent years researching his regiment's role in the First World War and even purchased the Croix Rouge Farm, where he led the construction of a memorial to the 167th and the Rainbow Division.²

Frazer argues that although it fought in World War II, Korea, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the 167th's greatest achievements occurred on the Western Front—"its 1918 tour remains unparalleled" (xii). He rightly contends that scholars have paid too little attention to Alabama's war record and seeks to correct that neglect.³ He has succeeded.

Frazer believes a combination of lack of interest nationally in the Alabamian war experience and the greater notoriety of other Rainbow Division regiments has silenced the 167th's story. Indeed, most Rainbow Division scholarship focuses on New York's famed "Fighting 69th" Regiment. Exalted during the Civil War, the unit was redesignated as the 165th Infantry Regiment in 1917. Its ranks included chaplain Father Francis P. Duffy, whose statue resides in Times Square, (then) Lt. Col. William J. "Wild Bill" Donovan, the future leader of the Office of Strategic Services (precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency), and poet Joyce Kilmer.⁴

Frazer makes good use of the scant secondary literature on his subject⁵ as well as primary sources available in American and French archives, diaries, letters, and Army reports. He includes many anecdotes his father told about the war. Reflecting on his frequent on-site inspections of battlefields, he comments that "In retracing the 167th's steps, I have been reminded that most of its men enlisted as ordinary men with simple ways. Their military service enabled them to participate in a complex, life-wrenching event, an adventure larger than they were. It also forged their identity. They left home as small-town southerners, but they returned as Americans" (xiv).

1. Another recent book similar to Frazer's is Gregory W. Ball, *They Called Them Soldier Boys: A Texas Infantry Regiment in World War I* (Denton: U North Texas Pr, 2013).

2. See further the detailed Croix Rouge Farm Memorial website – www.miwsr.com/rd/1617.htm.

3. The sole major work on Alabama's war record is William H. Amerine's nearly century-old *Alabama's Own in France* (NY: Eaton and Gettinger, 1919).

4. The classic war film *The Fighting 69th* (dir. William Keighley, 1940), starring James Cagney, features all three men.

5. Esp. Martin T. Olliff, ed., *The Great War in the Heart of Dixie: Alabama in World War I* (Tuscaloosa: U Alabama Pr, 2008); though this collection concentrates on the home front, a chapter by Ruth Smith Truss, "Military Participation at Home and Abroad, 1917-1918" (24-40), is a concise overview of material Frazer covers in more detail.

The book's first two chapters trace the origins of the 167th, which was formed from the Alabama National Guard, and its soldiers' record chasing Pancho Villa in Mexico during the Punitive Expedition in 1916–17. Chapter 3 discusses their stateside training, their journey across the Atlantic, and their time in England and France before they deployed to the Western Front. During a brutal trek through the snow, dubbed the "Valley Forge" March,

The conditions tormented everyone, but the Alabamians in particular had never experienced anything like the French cold, wind, and snow. They suffered more from weather and lack of rest than from fear of being killed in unknown battles. What might happen to them in a future battle was vague, something they had not experienced and that was not then hurting them. Cold was different. It was present and hurt desperately.... Toes and fingers ached. Some shoes were badly worn, as the constant drying of wet leather caused them to crack and tear. Several men's feet had deteriorated so drastically that their snowy path bore trails of blood. (54)

Chapter 3–9, the core of book, are an operational history of the 167th, detailing its record from the German spring offensives to the final days of the Meuse-Argonne campaign in 1918, with a brief account of its stay in Germany with the American Army of Occupation. Frazer augments his narrative with the reflections of the Alabamians themselves and other men of the Rainbow Division, including its commander, (then) Col. Douglas MacArthur. One of these, Capt. Mortimer Jordan, a medical doctor from Birmingham and recipient of a Distinguished Service Cross, evokes the resolute spirits that formed the backbone of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF). In a letter to his wife, ignoring his own heroics, he stresses the virtues of his men: "What pleased me most is our men have shown the most calm and desperate courage, lying unmoved under continuous shell fire.... The French are loud in their praise" (103).

The remaining chapter follows the 167th's triumphant voyage home, crowned by a spectacular parade honoring them in Montgomery. Frazer writes in conclusion that "Most would return to Alabama and resume their everyday lives. But they would never forget the welcome their state gave them when they returned home from the Great War. And, of course, memories of the war itself—the friendships, the ghosts, the cooties and mud—stayed with the men throughout their lives. No longer just citizens of a state, the men of the 167th were forever part of the great 'Alabam'" (207). But he closes on a sad note, disclosing that his father's alcoholism cost him a promotion and his wife (they divorced in 1937). That same year, his father's friend and fellow veteran, George Scott, committed suicide after his business faltered.

Frazer makes a misleading generalization about the war. Discussing tensions between the Americans and their Allies, he states that "The French and the British, whose offensive approach led to hundreds of thousands of casualties in 1914, favored defensive warfare from then on—a tactic the Americans resisted" (67). This is not true. The Allies espoused an offensive strategy throughout the war, especially the French, who were deeply imbued with a cult of the offensive. And, too, prevailing conditions on the Western Front dictated such a strategy: the Germans held Luxembourg, most of Belgium, and a vital industrial region in northeastern France. Had the Allies done nothing, Germany would have kept the initiative due to their occupation of these territories. Except for Gen. Erich von Falkenhayn's major offensive at Verdun in 1916, the Germans maintained an overall defensive posture till the 1918 spring offensives. The Allies pursued offenses in 1915 at Neuve-Chapelle, Second Ypres, Second Champagne, and Loos. Even larger Allied aggressive campaigns followed at the Somme and Third Ypres (Passchendaele) as well as during the Nivelle Offensive.⁶

6. For an excellent overview of First World War combat, see Peter Hart, *The Great War: A Combat History of the First World War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2013). For Allied offensive matters, see Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *The French Army and the First World War*

Frazer also writes that, in facing the German Army, “The Rainbow was getting its first look at the *Sturmgruppen* (deep penetration groups) tactics. These German infiltration methods started in 1917 to replace the casualty-heavy ‘over the top’ attacks of 1914–15” (81).⁷ Scholars usually call these soldiers “troops” (*Sturmtruppen* or *Stoßtruppen*), not “groups,” and German experimentation with shock troops began in March 1915 (not 1917) with the formation of the first assault “detachment” (*Sturmabteilung*); in August, Willy Rohr organized the first assault “battalion” (*Sturmbataillon*). Storm troopers were extensively deployed at Verdun.⁸

These quibbles aside, *Send the Alabamians* makes a significant contribution to scholarship on the AEF with its fine-grained account of Alabama’s Great War combat experience. The book is enriched by very helpful appendices: appendix A is a thirteen-page timeline of events relevant to the 167th; B and C show the Rainbow Division’s organization; D briefly describes members of 167th who died in France; and E lists all the men of the unit before its departure for France. Twelve maps and twenty-six photographs illustrate the 167th’s journey.

Nimrod Frazier’s thorough, carefully researched account of the 167th will appeal to Alabamians as well as serious students and scholars of the First World War. The book stands as a fine testament to the courage and sacrifice of the soldiers of the American Expeditionary Forces.

(NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2014), reviewed at *MiWSR* 2016-073 – www.miwsr.com/rd/1618.htm, and Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army’s Art of Attack 1916–18* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1994). For Germany’s defensive measures see Jack Sheldon, esp. *The German Army in the Spring Offensives 1917: Arras, Aisne and Champagne* (Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword, 2015) and *The German Army on the Western Front 1915* (id., 2012).

7. He does switch to the term *Sturmtruppen*, though still inaccurately stating the date of their introduction: “[the German Army] would use traditional mass troops as well as *Sturmtruppen*, the highly motivated, majority-volunteer force, and implement new deep penetration tactics” (92).

8. See further Bruce I. Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914–1918* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1989), and Hellmuth Gruss, *Aufbau und Verwendung der deutschen Sturmbataillone im Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Junker und Dunnhaupt, 1939).