

1945 December 10-16

Guarding the Home Front

State Guard Company Drills Tuesday Night

Co. M, Wisconsin State Guard, will hold its regular drill this week Tuesday at 7:30 p. m. at the South avenue armory. Next week the guard will return to its regular Monday night drill schedule. Tuesday night there will be a rifle match between Co. M and the La Crosse Rifle club.

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 December 10, page 5)

Some might confuse the Wisconsin State Guard with the Wisconsin National Guard, but they were distinct entities. Their roles during World War II were determined by the federal and state government.

With war raging in Europe and Asia in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the United States started to increase its military preparedness. One action was the inclusion of state National Guard units into the United States armed forces.

President Franklin Roosevelt signed an executive order on August 31, 1940, for a phased mobilization of the National Guard into the United States Army.¹ Guardsmen, Reservists, and draftees were obligated to one year of federal service. The world situation caused extensions of the call-up, so the National Guard was to remain on active duty until August 1942.²

Pearl Harbor changed all of that. Now nearly everyone was in the war for the duration.

With all National Guard troops fighting a world war, the states were left without the emergency manpower usually mobilized for domestic emergencies. The states responded by creating State Guard forces. At their peak in June 1943, there were 170,403 State Guard troops in forty-four states.³

When La Crosse County National Guardsmen were mobilized, a local State Guard company started enlisting men in March 1941. It was mobilized on May 9, 1941, as Company I, 6th Battalion, Wisconsin State Guard. The unit became Company E, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment in July the same year.⁴ Members had to be between the ages of 36 and 56, pass a physical examination, and not likely to be drafted. Captain Oscar Johnson said he was looking for "good, patriotic men who believe in preparedness, men who will not shirk their duties as American citizens, men who do not belong to any subversive organization." The initial enlistment was for one year.⁵



(La Crosse Tribune, 1941 December 9, page 13)

By the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, Company E had its full complement of 60 enlisted men and five commissioned officers, with six men on the waiting list. Each man was issued a full uniform, a rifle, a cartridge belt, and a bayonet with scabbard.⁶

The original leadership of the company was:

Capt. Oscar J. Johnson, 414 N. 16th Street, commander

Capt. W. W. Bayley, 1801 Cass Street, medical officer

1st Lt. Theodore C. Gardner, 432 Oakland Street

2nd Lt. Felix R. Novak, 221 S. 9th Street

Maj. Arthur Rogger, 411 S. 11th Street, battalion staff chemical warfare officer

Capt. Arthur Renner, 814 S. 17th Street, battalion supply officer

1st Sgt. Clayton A. Whitney

Sgts. Harry H. Gerke, Frank D. Hagenbaugh, Ernest F. Wojahn, Harold W. Owen, Harry Sween, Charles E. Arntsen, Frank R. Denison, Raymond E. Gerke, Albert E. Jamesson, Clifford B. Lee, George R. Zoerb Corp. John E. Benesh⁷

The approximately 40 privates were from La Crosse, Onalaska, Holmen, West Salem, and Bangor.⁸



—Tribune Photo

Inspection Of Equipment Of Co. M, of the Wisconsin State Guard 3rd Battalion, was held at the South avenue Armory Monday night as part of the unit's regular drill. Checking records of the company are, left to right: Seated, Maj. Adelbert Wilson, Tomah, executive officer of the battalion, and Lieut. Col. C. C. Evans, Stevens Point, commander of the battalion; standing, Capt. Theodore Garder, commanding officer of the La Crosse company; Maj. Marvin H. Podeweltz, Stevens Point, battalion plans and training officer; Sgt. George Finch, La Crosse; and Capt. Allan Leahy, Stevens Point, battalion adjutant.

(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 March 27, page 3)



—Tribune Photos

Members Of Co. M, Wisconsin State Guard, who aided police in V-E duty Monday, had their "chow" at the USO. Left to right eating stew are Sgt. R. Jaeger, Sgt. Selmer Hogan, Pvt. James Russell, Pfc. William G. Eckart, and Pvt. William Wolters.

(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 May 8, page 12)

Leadership and membership changed through the years as men were discharged or entered the regular armed forces. The table of organization also changed. When Captain Johnson was discharged in December 1943, Theodore Gardner was promoted to captain and commanding officer. Harry Gerke, Albert Jamesson, and George Zoerb became lieutenants. At the end of August 1945, what was now Company M, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment consisted of four commissioned officers and 47 enlisted men.⁹



—Tribune Photo

Members Of Co. M, Wisconsin State Guard, are receiving instruction in rifle shooting as part of their regular training work. Seated, left to right, are Pvt. Gordon Feinberg, Kingston court; Pfc. Edson G. Herreid, 1409 Wood; and Pfc. William G. Eckart, 2141 Winnebago. Instructors, kneeling, are Ralph Markham, 2236 South 15th, and Pfc. M. E. Ripplinger, Green Acres.

Note the World War I-vintage helmets

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 May 5, page 8)

The company had a drill every Monday night at the armory on South Avenue in La Crosse. The focus of their training was preparation for riots or domestic disturbances. Field training took place during the summer at Hatfield, Camp Williams, or the Civilian Conservation Corps camp north of Black River Falls.¹⁰

The Wisconsin State Guard was a volunteer organization, so the only pay these men received was for their days at summer field training.¹¹



—Tribune Photo

Members of Companies M, I, L and K of the Wisconsin State Guard attended battalion school at Tomah Sunday and took part in the parade from the Tomah armory to the drill field early in the afternoon. Color bearers are (left to right) Sgt. Fred W. Luedtke, Pfc. Ray Chapiewsky and Sgt. W. L. Christopherson.

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 June 18, page 6)

Company M of the Wisconsin State Guard continued to meet and drill through 1946 and the first half of 1947. The end came on June 16, 1947, when the La Crosse unit was demobilized. Theodore Gardner, Harry H. Gerke, John McCann, George Zoerb, and Fred Luedtke had been with the unit since it came into existence in 1941. The Wisconsin National Guard was being reorganized to take over the area duties on July 1, 1947.¹²

Like so many other wartime organizations, it had done what needed to be done at the time. It was just one of the many ways people on the home front volunteered for the war effort.



Company M, Wisconsin State Guard, one week before demobilization

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1947 June 15, page 14)



Wisconsin State Guard patch

(ebay.com)

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Sources & Notes:

¹ Michael D. Doubler, *Civilian in Peace, Soldier in War: The Army National Guard, 1636-2000* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 198.

² Doubler, 200-201.

³ Doubler, 203.

⁴ "State Guard Company Prepared To Meet Any Wartime Emergency Arising On Home Front," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 May 7, page 4.

⁵ "Seek Enlistments In Guard Company," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1941 April 23, page 2.

⁶ "La Crosse Unit Ready For Any Federal Orders," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1941 December 9, page 13.

⁷ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1941 December 9.

⁸ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1941 December 9. This article lists the entire roster of Company M at that time.

⁹ *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 May 7, page 4. It became Company M in February 1944.

¹⁰ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 May 7.

¹¹ "Blow To State Guard," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 June 6, page 6. The main topic of this editorial is Governor Goodland's partial veto of the state budget that funded Wisconsin State Guard annual summer encampments for field training.

¹² "La Crosse State Guard Unit Will Be Demobilized Monday," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1947 June 15, page 14. The photo caption accompanying this article lists the members of the company at the time it dissolved.