



Short History of the 31st US Infantry Regiment - The Polar Bears

“America’s Foreign Legion”

THE BEGINNING

The 31st Infantry Regiment was formed at Fort William McKinley, Philippine Islands on August 13, 1916. In the spring of 1918, the 31st moved from Manila's tropics to the bitter cold of Siberia. Its mission, left vague by a deeply divided administration, was ostensibly to prevent allied war material left sitting on Vladivostok's docks from being looted. For the next 2 years, the 31st and its sister regiment, the 27th Infantry, fought off bands of Manchurian and Cossack bandits and Red revolutionaries plundering the Siberian countryside and trying to gain control of the Trans-Siberian Railroad. They also dissuaded their 40,000 Japanese "allies" from taking control of Russian territory. When the smoke cleared, 16 members of the 31st had earned the Distinguished Service Cross and 32 were killed in action in a two-year war few Americans even knew was being fought. For its Service in Siberia, the 31st Infantry became known as "The Polar Bear Regiment", adopting a silver polar bear as its insignia.

THE PHILIPPINES

Returning to the Philippines in 1920, the 31st garrisoned the old walled city of Manila until February 1932 when Japanese troops invaded China. Reinforcing the 4th Marines and a predominantly British International Force, the 31st Infantry deployed hastily by sea to protect Shanghai's International Settlement. Although adjacent parts of Shanghai were demolished by fierce fighting between Japanese and Chinese troops, the International Settlement remained an island of security. By April, some officers sent for their families from Manila and billeted them at a hotel in the International Settlement. When the crisis passed, the 31st returned to Manila in the summer of 1932. Before departing Shanghai, the regiment's officers commemorated the mission by purchasing a silver punch bowl and 29 ornamental cups at a cost of \$1600. The set became the regiment's most cherished possession.

On December 8, 1941, Japanese planes attacked U.S. military installations in the Philippines. A 31st Infantry sergeant on detail at Cp John Hay became the campaign's first fatality. After landing in northern and southern Luzon, the Japanese pushed rapidly toward Manila, routing hastily formed Philippine Army units that had little training and few heavy weapons. The 31st Infantry covered the withdrawal of American and Philippine forces to the Bataan Peninsula. Unfortunately, the peninsula had not been provisioned with food and medicine and no help could come in from the outside after much of the Pacific fleet was destroyed at Pearl Harbor and mid-ocean bases at Guam and Wake

were lost. Despite starvation, disease, no supplies, obsolete weapons, and often inoperative ammunition, the peninsula's defenders fought the Japanese to a standstill for 4 months, upsetting Japan's timetable for Asia's conquest. When MG King announced he would surrender the Bataan Defense Force on April 9, 1942, the 31st Infantry buried its colors and the cherished Shanghai Bowl to keep them out of enemy hands. Some of the 31st's survivors escaped to continue resisting, but most underwent brutal torture and humiliation on the Death March and nearly 4 years of captivity. Twenty-nine of the regiment's members earned the Distinguished Service Cross and one was recommended for the Medal of Honor, but the entire chain of command died in captivity before the medal recommendation could be formally submitted. Roughly half of the 1600 members of the 31st Infantry who surrendered at Bataan perished while prisoners of the Japanese.

KOREA

In January 1946, General MacArthur restored his former guard of honor to active service at Seoul, Korea, assigning the 31st to the 7th Infantry Division. For the next 2 years the 31st Infantry performed occupation duty in central Korea, facing the Soviet Army across the 38th Parallel. In 1948, the occupation of Korea ended and the regiment moved to the Japanese island of Hokkaido, occupying the land of its former tormentor. When North Korean troops invaded South Korea in the summer of 1950, the 31st Infantry was stripped to cadre strength to reinforce other units being sent to Korea. In September, the division was restored to full strength with replacements from the U.S. and Koreans hastily drafted by their government and shipped to Japan for a few weeks training before returning to their homeland as members of American units. The 31st Infantry returned to Korea as part of MacArthur's Inchon invasion force.

In November 1950, the 31st Infantry made its second amphibious invasion of the campaign, landing at Iwon, not far from Vladivostok where the 31st had fought just 30 years before. With North Korean resistance shattered, UN troops pushed toward the Yalu River. When Chinese troops swept down from Manchuria to the Chosen Reservoir, they surrounded the Army's task force (the 31st Infantry Regiment with 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry attached) led by the 31st Infantry's commander, COL Alan MacLean. During the battle COL MacLean and all of the 31st Infantry's battalion commanders were killed. LTC Don C. Faith, the battalion commander of the 1-32 Infantry, took command of what remained of the 31st Regiment and led counterattacks to keep the withdrawal route open for the task force and the 5th US Marine Regiment. In these actions LTC Faith was also killed. LTC Faith won the Medal of Honor for his gallant attempt to lead the command to safety. Only 385 of the task force's original 3200 members survived.

The 31st Infantry was far from finished. The regiment was evacuated from North Korea by sea to Pusan. There it rebuilt, retrained, and refitted and was soon back in combat, stopping the Chinese at Chechon, South Korea and participating in the counteroffensive to retake central Korea. Near the Hwachon Reservoir, two members of the regiment earned the Medal of Honor in some of the war's most determined offensive combat. By the summer of 1951, the line stabilized near the war's start point along the 38th Parallel. For the next two years, a seemingly endless series of blows were exchanged across central Korea's cold, desolate hills. Names like Old Baldy, Pork Chop Hill, Triangle Hill, and OP Dale are among the war's most famous battles, all fought by the 31st Infantry

and bought with its blood. By the war's end, the 31st Infantry had suffered many times its strength in losses and 5 of its members had earned the Medal of Honor.

REORGANIZATION

After the war, the 31st Infantry Regiment remained in Korea until the Army reorganized all infantry regiments into battle groups in 1957. The 1st Battle Group 31st Infantry, representing the only regiment that had never served in the continental United States, remained in Korea with the 7th Infantry Division. In 1958, after more than 40 years of continuous overseas a unit of the Regiment came home when the 2d Battle Group 31st Infantry was formed at Ft Rucker, Alabama, planing the proud regiment's flag on the U.S. homeland for the first time in its history. In 1959, the 3d Battle Group 31st Infantry was formed in the Army Reserve in southern California as part of the 63d Infantry Division. When the Army abandoned battle groups in favor of brigades and battalions in 1963, the 31st Infantry's 1st and 2d Battalions were reactivated in Korea, the 3d Battalion remained in the Army Reserve, and the 5th Battalion replaced the 2d Battle Group at Ft Rucker. When the war in Vietnam came, two more battalions of the 31st Infantry were formed. The 4th Battalion was formed at Fort Devens, Massachusetts in 1965 and the 6th Battalion was formed at Ft Lewis, Washington in 1967.

VIETNAM

The 4th Battalion went to Vietnam in the spring of 1966, operating initially in War Zone D and around Tay Ninh near the Cambodian border. In 1967, the battalion moved north to help form the 23d "Americal" Infantry Division. Operating at Quang Ngai, Chu Lai, and the Que Son Valley for most of the rest of the war, the 4th Battalion fought to keep Viet Cong guerillas and the North Vietnamese Army from capturing the coastal lowlands. Two of the battalion's members earned the Medal of Honor almost a year apart near the bitterly-contested village of Hiep Duc. When American forces departed, the 4th Battalion 31st Infantry was part of the last brigade to leave Vietnam. It was inactivated in 1971.

The 6th Battalion was sent to Vietnam in the spring of 1968, arriving just in time to help recapture Saigon's suburbs during the enemy's abortive May offensive. For the next two years, the 6th Battalion fought all across the Mekong Delta and the Plain of Reeds. When the 9th Infantry Division departed in 1969, the 6th Battalion 31st Infantry formed the nucleus of a 1200 man task force under LTC Gerald Carlson to cover the division's departure. Task Force Carlson established a reputation as perhaps the most aggressive and successful battalion in the division's history. Remaining in Vietnam, the 6th Battalion crossed into Cambodia in May 1970, making the famed "Seminole Raid" to seize and destroy a huge enemy base area bordering the Plain of Reeds. The battalion returned to Ft Lewis for inactivation in October 1970.

REACTIVATION

In 1971, the 2d Battalion was inactivated in Korea. The 1st Battalion remained in Korea, however, serving there until its inactivation in 1987. It has still never served in the continental United States. In 1974, the 2d Battalion was reactivated at Ft Ord, CA where it remained until its inactivation in 1988. The 4th Battalion was reactivated at Ft Sill, OK to support the Field Artillery School and the 6th Battalion was reactivated at Ft Irwin, CA, serving there until its inactivation in 1988. In 1995, the 4th Battalion was inactivated at Ft Sill and reactivated as part of the 10th Mountain Division at Ft Drum, New York the following April. It is now the regiment's only remaining battalion. The blending of "Polar Bears" with the "Division of Mountaineers" in New York's cold north country is a fitting match in which another generation of American soldiers uphold our proud motto "Pro Patria" (for country).

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In September and October 2001, the Polar Bears were once again called to arms to participate in the nation's War on Terror. From Maryland to Kuwait, Qatar and Uzbekistan the 31st protected American forces and facilities from terrorist attack. As America and its coalition partners struck back, the Polar Bears of the 4th Battalion deployed to Afghanistan, fighting in the Shah-I-Kowt Valley region and successfully eliminating it as a safe haven for international terrorism. In April 2002, the Polar Bears returned to Fort Drum

In 2003 roughly 300 soldiers from the 4-31st deployed to Djibouti in support of CJTF-HOA as TF 4-31. Company C was one of the units identified as having deployed.

C Company, 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, conducted the various training exercises during in July 2003, while in Djibouti including known distance ranges, both in Djibouti and Ethiopia; reflexive fire ranges, both in Djibouti and Ethiopia; AK-47 range for familiarization of the weapon system; familiarization ranges for Shotguns and 9mm Pistols; External Sling Load training with Heavy Marine Helicopter Company (HMH-461) both day and night iterations to help certify them; its Mortar platoon underwent training on the mortar ballistic computer and the plotting board to further their proficiency. They also conducted military to military training in Hurso, Ethiopia and provided a security mission in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

THE POLAR BEARS TODAY

The 4th Battalion 31st Infantry currently serves as part of the 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division stationed in Fort Drum, New York. The unit has deployed on multiple deployments to Iraqi and Afghanistan from 2006 to 2014. From 2015 to early 2016, the 4th Battalion deployed for 9 months to 13 locations in Afghanistan providing security to key facilities and training Afghan Army units continuing the Regiment's long and faithful service to our country and freedom around the world.