

BIG STONE GAP GOES TO WAR

The Civil War

The First Gulf War

The Second Gulf War

Parts Two and Three Copyright by:
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In the beginnings of all the wars between the Civil War and the First Gulf War, no preexisting military unit in Big Stone Gap made a dramatic group departure to the conflict. January 29, 2005 marks the second anniversary of the departure of The Big Stone Gap National Guard for The Second Gulf War in Iraq. As of today, this conflict continues. It is appropriate that we should remember the three times troop formations left Big Stone Gap for war.

The Civil War

In the summer of 1861 Company A, 51st Virginia Infantry, CSA, Floyd's Brigade, formed in Big Stone Gap, Virginia. W. P Wampler, whose home sat just east of the current bridge over Powell River at the entrance into East Stone Gap, and whose farm included Wampler Hollow, which US 23 traverses between the Walmart Shopping Center and the East Stone Gap Road, left a moving account of its recruitment and departure. It follows in its original spelling:

“So they appointed a day when they would meet and call for volinteeres. They met at Big Stone Gap. Everybody was on hand old and young. Some one made a speech and kindeled the martial fire in the boys. So they unfurled the flag and floted it in the air a few times and Unkel Rafues Kilgore commenced beating the raley on his old war druem and some one led the way and shouted fall in boys so there was not a youeng man left but what marched under the flag. ... Soon we went to Wise Court House and commenced drilling and preparing for the grate strugel of war.”

The First Gulf War

The forces of Sadam Hussein had invaded Kuwait, and America found it necessary to hurriedly go to war to drive the Iraqi forces out. The Virginia National Guard's 189th Engineering Co., located at the National Guard Armory in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, left for Fort Eustis on November 21, 1990.

The point of departure was the parking lot then occupied by Magic Mart, and had once been the play ground for the Big Stone Gap School on Wood Avenue. The time

designated was about 2-3 AM, which seemed wretched enough at first glimpse, but which did allow for people to catch some sleep both before and after the departure.

Seemingly every vehicle with a flashing light, including fire trucks, police cars, and ambulances, lined up in front. W. R. "Spec" Mumpower seemed to be in unofficial command of the town's send-off squadron. His authoritative smiling visage aboard the town's fire truck seemed natural, as he had been Fire Chief since before most people could remember.

The Powell Valley High School Band formed up on the parking lot, perpendicular to the route of parade down Wood Ave. I say "high school" for want of a better word. Many of the students could not have been further along than the seventh or eighth grade. Their uniforms were too big to even have been pinned in place. It is likely that some of the band had parents leaving with the Guard.

The friends and neighbors of the National Guardsmen stood in informal clusters on both sides of the band. The Big Stone Gap National Guard sat in the rear of several trucks, outfitted in clean new fatigues. The Boy Scouts were in formation.

The atmosphere was one of dignified foreboding. There were no heroics on display. The expectations were for heavy fighting against a foe that had recently fought Iran in a bloodbath of a war, and who was known to be well armed with the best weapons that oil money could buy. It was known that the Big Stone Gap National Guard was an oil tanker unit, and that they would be hauling oil to the American Army as it fought its way into Iraq. Heavy casualties were a reasonable expectation.

On some prearranged signal unnoted by the crowd, the dome lights on the emergency vehicles began to turn, and the procession started toward E. 5th Street, and the Wild Cat Road. The Powell Valley band struck up the "Stars and Stripes Forever". It was a simplified version, but the Band launched itself into it with heroic determination, and never looked back. As the Guard rolled silently by, the spectators waved goodbye. There was no cheering, no enthusiasm, only brave dignity.

There was one young girl on the outside row of the band that was flailing away on a trumpet as if the world depended on her efforts to play Sousa's rousing but difficult piece. Her uniform legs were turned up, her coat enveloped her in a formless embrace, with its sleeves covering her hands. Her hat was so overly large that it had not stopped its descent upon her until its crown rested on the top of her head, and covered half her ears. She had a thousand yard stare, and she blew and blew as tears streamed down her cheeks. There has never been a more moving rendition of that piece.

Soon the last vehicle of the Guard was swallowed up by the night, and with empty pits where their stomachs had once resided, the crowd dissipated.

The Second Gulf War

The First Gulf War had ended with its limited objective of having run the Iraqi out of Kuwait having been achieved, but with Saddam Hussein still in power. Far from having learned his lesson, he rebuilt his forces, and threatened chemical, nuclear, and biologic holocaust. The World Trade Center had been leveled by terrorists, and Hussein had given comfort to the enemy. The USA found it necessary to invade Iraq a second time, in order to remove this threat.

On January 29, 2003 Big Stone Gap's National Guard, the 189th Engineering Co., again departed for Fort Eustis.

The point of departure was the National Guard Armory. It was midmorning, and the air was so cold that it was painful. Ice particles formed and fell out of the air. There was no sky, only a gray foreboding low gray ceiling of troubled clouds held up by the mountains.

A shivering crowd was gathered up in the parking lot beside the Armory. In its center was a group of perhaps a dozen Veterans of Foreign Wars, in varying bits and pieces of old uniforms.

Expectations were of pure terror, of battlefields seeded with smallpox, anthrax, and nerve gas. There was no doubt that it had to be done. The World Trade Center still smoldered in people's memories, and many in the crowd knew someone who knew someone that had been in the Pentagon when death fell on it from the sky.

The column of vehicles began to roll down the hill. The group of aged VFW members snapped to attention. That was, in itself, heart rending. Many could not stand up straight, their spines no longer capable of it. Some could not even turn loose of their walkers. Did you ever see someone stand at attention with both hands gripping a walker? It was done that day.

And then the Catholic Church bell began to toll. It was not a joyous ringing, but a funeral dirge that split the icy air. People choked up, with their eyes gapped open, as they watched their loved ones and neighbors roll away into the anticipated Hell, their funeral already being celebrated. Strangers who happened upon the scene instantly took in all in and broke into tears. And then they were gone.