

# 121st Infantry The "Gray Bonnet" Regiment

These chapters are reprinted from *THE GRAY BONNET - COMBAT HISTORY OF THE 121ST INFANTRY REGIMENT 1810-1945*.

## The Beginning

In January, 1944, while the men of the 121st Infantry shivered in the log-bunker defenses of the Huertgen Forest, Colonel Thomas J. Cross, the Regimental Commander, conceived the idea that a courageous band of fighting men who had conquered the Huertgen Forest where others had failed were worthy of a history of their own.

The Commander summoned me to spend my time not actually devoted to composing public relations releases to the detail of collecting data and incidents for that project. The result is herewith presented with due apologies of an amateur in the art of writing history.

The tactical action of the book is based on "After Action Reports" of the 121st Infantry Regiment, and the 8th Infantry Division. The human element of the story that means so much more to the men than the cold tactics of a military operation was provided by scores of interviews with G.I.'s of the regiment from Huertgen to Schwerin.

I hope with Colonel Cross, the originator of the project, that the chapters which follow will renew the spirit of pride that all of us experienced who were members of the fighting Gray Bonnet regiment in those trying days of combat.

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1st Lt., Infantry

Fort Leonard Wood, MO  
October, 1945

## Chapter 1

### Molders Of A Fighting Regiment



“The day of all days has come and gone. It was a success from every standpoint.”

October 14, 1928 was “the day of all days” on Mulberry Street, Macon, GA. It was a momentous day to the thousands of Georgians who packed the main thoroughfare for a glimpse of the military spectacle

unfolding before them. It was an historic day in the annals of a proud military unit, the 121st Infantry of Georgia. The Regimental Colors which had been taken away from the “Old Gray Bonnet” regiment on October 22, 1918, finally had been returned for presentation. Captain Charles F. Stuart, Regimental Adjutant at the time, continues his account of the day in a colorful chapter of his diary.

“All in all, it was the best and most imposing ceremony this regiment ever put on. It was a day to warm the heart and make one feel proud: to make that little feeling come into your throat as the Colors were flung to the breeze and moved by the gentle wind.

“All of the men were equipped and wearing the Old Gray Bonnet insignia, and it looked mighty good in its first appearance. . .”

“Today, lacking just a week of being ten years, they come back to us, this time in the shape of a new and

entirely original color. Proud? I should say yes! Proud is not sufficient to express how we feel. . . 'Tis more than that and then some that enriches the heart of each member of the Old Gray Bonnet regiment today.”

It has been 17 years since those words were recorded. in the interim, the colors of the 121st Infantry have traveled many thousands of miles: across a continent through South Carolina,

Tennessee, Missouri, Arizona, California, and back again; across an ocean to Northern Ireland; across a channel to France, through Luxembourg and



**HOT STUFF:** Training in the use of flame throwers came in handy later on when Bonnets besieged Wehrmacht pill boxes.

Germany. Now they rest in garrison once again in the United States.

The words of the diary are prophetic. Neither they nor the spirit of a fighting regiment which they so aptly describe have changed. The greatest of military achievements have been attained in the intervening years. Proud is still not sufficient to express how the leaders and men of the renowned regiment feel. The history of a mighty world power boasts of few military organization with achievements to match those of the Old Gray Bonnet Regiment of Georgia. Some are as old in origin, a few older, but none quite so full of a determination to succeed in the face of heartbreaking odds.

The earliest unit of the embryonic 121st Infantry was the Baldwin Blues organized at Milledgeville, GA., on May 11, 1810. Shortly before the outbreak of the War between the States, this organization was joined by the Floyd Rifles, the Albany Guards, and the Barnesville Blues.

In the Post Reconstruction Period, the Pulaski

Volunteers, Welton Guards, and Southern Cadets became member units of the regiment.

Subsequently, they were joined by the Milledgeville Light Infantry, the Dublin Guards, and the Jackson Rifles. In 1924 the Brunswick Rifles, Waycross Guards, Valdosta Videttes, and Vienna Howitzer Company completed the formal organization of the regiment.

Each of these companies represented a section of the state of Georgia. At various times, however, they were attached to different military units. During the War Between the States, they were members of the 4th Regiment Georgia Volunteers, the 3rd Georgia Battalion, and the 37th Georgia Regiment.

In 1874 most of the companies were united to form the 2nd Georgia Battalion. In 1891 the other units in existence at the time consolidated forces to form the 2nd Georgia Infantry.

Federalization of this unit was realized in 1916. The following year, the 2nd Georgia Infantry officially became the 121st infantry, a regiment of the 31st ("Dixie") Division. During the early stages of World War I, the regiment supplied many replacements to units alerted for overseas duty. Its own call to duty came in September, 1918.

On the 29th of the month, the Old Gray Bonnet regiment sailed from Hoboken, NJ. It debarked at Brest, France, on October 18 for quartering at Pontanezen Barracks.

But World War I was to bring days of heartbreaking disappointment to a regiment geared for action. The first blow was the loss of a revered Regimental Commander, Colonel J. A. Thomas. The man responsible for the adoption of the regimental title, "Old Gray Bonnet Regiment," quietly passed away aboard ship in the harbor at Brest

It was a severe blow to leaders and men who had not only patterned their tactics but also their lives after a respected disciplinarian who had trained them for years for the combat ahead. The body of the leader was returned to Macon, GA, to be

accorded a full military funeral.

While Georgians mourned the loss of Colonel Thomas and the regiment sought to rebound in spirit from the catastrophe, a second blow fell. Shortly after their arrival at Le Mans, France, on October 22, 1918, the Gray Bonnets were notified that they would not go into combat as a unit. The regiment was to be broken up into replacement groups to be dispatched to various divisions on the line. Leaders and men were to fight for the glory of other units.

Not all was lost, however. Companies B, C, and F, which had been separated from the Gray Bonnets prior to their departure from the states for overseas duty, were transferred intact to the Rainbow Division, the fighting 42nd Division. As the 151st Machine Gun Battalion, the former men of the 121st Infantry were listed among the heroes of that famed division.

After World War I, the regiment was reorganized and in 1921 was designated the 1st Georgia infantry. In 1922, it became the 122nd Infantry. Finally in 1924, the regiment reverted to its prewar designation, the 121st infantry, Georgia National Guard.

The predecessors of the recent heroes of Normandy, Brest, Crozon, Huertgen, Roer-Rhine, Ruhr pocket and Elbe River offensives had been busily engaged in combat

since the inception of the Baldwin Blues.

A detachment of Floyd's Rifles fought in the war against Mexico in 1846. During the War Between the States, units of the regiment fought in every important engagement. Malvern Hill, Sharpsburg, Spottsylvania, Gettysburg, the Second Manassas, Richmond, the Seven Pines, Mechanicsville, Cold Harbor, the Wilderness and Appomattox are listed as scenes of combat in the regimental annals.

The Barnesville Blues fought in the Spanish-American War as Company F of the 2nd Georgia

Regiment. From 1916 to 1917, the Gray Bonnets patrolled the troubled Mexican border and performed duty in Georgia and Florida before shipping overseas.

Peacetime training days of the 'Twenties and early 'Thirties were not without their highlights. The regiment, now headed by Colonel Lewis C. Pope, engaged in sundry wars against flood waters, mosquitoes, and strikers.

In July 1925 while the regiment was encamped at Tybee Island, GA., a devastating hurricane struck. The camp was practically demolished. The swirling waters ran waist deep through the company streets. Men enjoyed the unusual, if dubious, pleasure of swimming about the camp.

Shortly after the camp had been rebuilt, another natural foe faced the Gray Bonnets. Great swarms of mosquitoes attacked the camp and finally caused a massed evacuation. The men were very happy to return home after this experience.

Labor troubles in the Georgia cotton mills brought the regiment into action during August, 1934. The troubles were short-lived and offered little "combat



**DESERT RATS:** A pleasant "duck-walk" in the Arizona desert sweated the kinks out of one's legs. The Bonnets were sweating out shells and sniper's rounds years later.

action" for the Gray Bonnets.

While an unsettled Europe stood on the brink of war in 1938 the regiment began to gird itself for any eventuality. Colonel Pope led his men through War

Games with the United States Army in De Soto National Forest, Miss.

The die was cast. England went to war with Germany on September 1, 1939. Colonel Pope rightly gauged the gravity of the situation. Three days later he summoned his regimental staff and battalion commanders for an historic session in the Birdsey home, Macon, which served as Regimental Headquarters. Mobilization plans for the regiment were lengthily discussed.

The crisis of an impending war stirred a patriotic populace. From all parts of Georgia came volunteers to swell the ranks of the 121st Infantry. In August, 1940, the greatly augmented unit maneuvered in the Louisiana swamplands.

The Gray Bonnets were inducted into the Federal Service on September 16, 1940. By the close of the month, Colonel Pope and his men had assembled at Fort Jackson, SC, and joined the 30th Infantry Division. With broomsticks as rifles and stovepipes as mortar tubes, the regiment initiated a 16-week basic training program at Fort Jackson. Much of the time of the original group of trainees was devoted to building ranges and laying out training and drill grounds at this camp.

In June, 1941, the Gray Bonnets, as a unit of the 30th Division, participated in the Second Army maneuvers in Tennessee. Returning to Fort Jackson in July, the regiment moved into mock action in the First Army maneuvers in the Carolinas. Colonel Pope was succeeded by Colonel Aaron J. Becker in September, 1941.

During the final phase of the maneuvers in the Carolinas, the Gray Bonnets were transferred to the 8th Infantry Division, the parent unit under which the regiment was to see all of its combat in World War II. The transfer was made official on November 21, 1941. Shortly thereafter, the regiment expanded its ranks with one-year enlistments, I.R.T.C. replacements, and transfers from the 13th and 28th infantry regiments also of the 8th Division.

Colonel Albert H. Peyton succeeded Colonel Becker as Regimental Commander of the Gray Bonnets in August, 1942. War had become a reality—a harsh reality to our forces who had been fighting an up-hill battle in the Pacific. Combat was teaching costly lessons to the men overseas. It was through the sane application of these lessons to everyday training as prescribed by Colonel Peyton that many lives were saved when the Gray Bonnets finally reached the field of battle two years later.

In September, 1942, Colonel Peyton led his new charges to Second Army Maneuvers in Tennessee. At the close of the games in early November, the regiment encamped at Camp Forrest, Tenn., for a three-week period given over to rest and motor maintenance. The mosquito menace of the previous decade had been supplanted by the equally disturbing “chigger.” Bitter cold and snow marked the next movement from

Camp Forrest to Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. The regiment arrived at the new station on December 3, 1942. “Chigger” bites were forgotten in the plague of frostbitten hands and feet that now beset the infantrymen.

The seasoning process progressed in the desert sands of Arizona and California. The regiment left Fort Leonard Wood in March, 1943, entraining (or the Desert Training Center at Yuma, Ariz. The wilting rays of the desert sun tested the hardest of the sweltering doughs. Combat efficiency under varied conditions of

climate and terrain was the keynote of the army program. Many did not make the grade. A band of tired, wilted men moved from the desert back to Camp Forrest in August.

The following three months were devoted to preparations for overseas movement. A well-trained and long-primed 121st Infantry entrained for Camp Kilmer, NJ, on November 25, 1943. After a week of staging at this camp, the regiment moved to the Port of Embarkation at Brooklyn, NY. It set sail on December 5 for “Somewhere in the U. K.”

The infantrymen soon discovered the rough road of the Atlantic was not the dependable path of the training camp hike. A rugged ten-day voyage aboard the U.S.S. Beanville and the S.S. Columbie, a former French liner, carried the Gray Bonnets into Belfast Harbor. Late in the afternoon of December 15, the doughs gladly debarked from the long-tossed ship. Ireland was thousands of miles from



**NINE POINT LANDING:** Not many missed this hurdle of Ranger Training undergone by the Gray Bonnets. At least not many talked about missing it.

home. But it had one advantage—it was land, terra firma.

Six and a half months of combat training in camps at Ashbrooke-Colebrooke, Brookeborough, Fintona, and Dungannon, Northern Ireland, prepared the men for an imminent D-Day. Long hikes and rigid conditioning exercises formed an important phase of the training. A climatic hike of 45 miles tested the mettle of the hardened doughs. The combination of homesickness and a damp, clammy

depressing climate harried the spirits of leaders and men alike. Many outrightly preferred immediate combat to the constant nerve-wracking alertness that accented the unpleasantness of the climes.



**HEAVEHO! DOUGH:** Anchoring a cable in a stream-crossing problem was a man's job.

Training demonstrations became increasingly realistic. When Lieutenant General George S. Patton visited the Gray Bonnets during the spring of 1944, he paid glowing tribute to the demonstration of marching fire engaged in by the 1st Battalion headed by Lt. Col. Robert M. Jones. The fiery leader, who was soon to head the Third Army in its swift armored thrust through Normandy, was particularly impressed by the courage displayed by two doughs, Pvt. Richard Jones and Pvt. Julius J. Briel, of Company B.

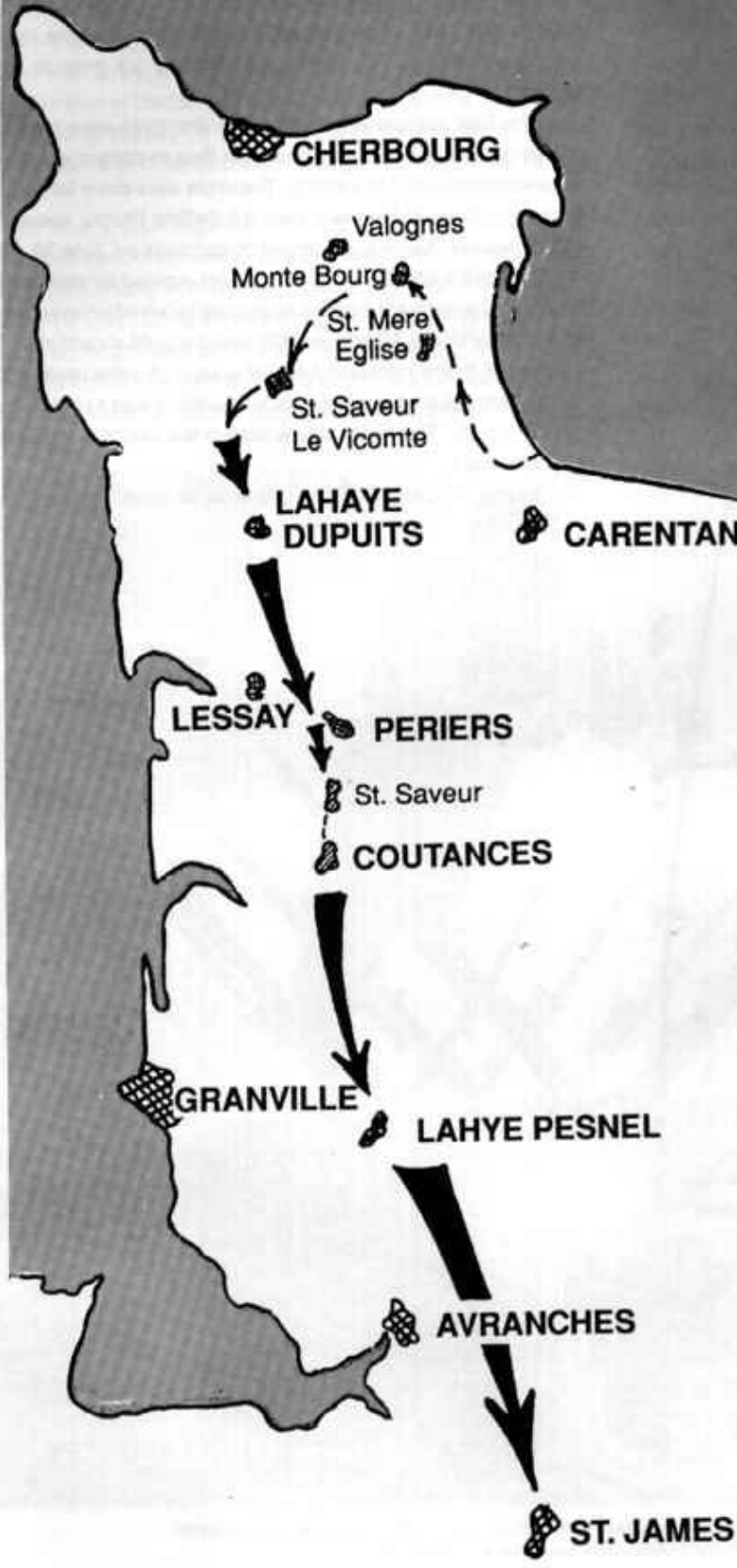
Briel and Jones were the first overseas heroes of the Gray Bonnets. Painfully wounded during the “marching fire” demonstration, the two nevertheless continued to move and fire their weapons until the problem had been completed. Both were awarded the Soldier's Medal. They were the predecessors of hundreds of Gray Bonnets who were soon to distinguish themselves on the field of battle.

The hedgerow country of Normandy—the first field of battle—was not far away. Approximately two months after the realistic demonstration, Lt. Col. Jones was leading his men in actual combat.

The field manual and the training directives were packed in shipping cases. There was no longer time to correct errors or to review shortcomings in training. The chips were down for the Gray Bonnets. Colonel Peyton's men left Belfast Harbor aboard the U.S.S. Marine Raven under cover of darkness on June 30, 1944.

The battle lay ahead for a regiment molded by tradition and training. The regimental colors so proudly received in the ceremony on Mulberry Street, Macon, in 1928 were brought aboard ship. The regimental motto inscribed below the coat of arms could not be viewed through the barrier of a packing crate. It was a circumstance of little import. The motto was written in the hearts of the doughs it represented.

It read: *Faciendum Est* . . . “it shall be done.” It was.



# *Normandy Campaign*