

## WINCHESTER MACHINE GUN COMPANY

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

In 1918, the Board of Selectmen did something it had never done before and never did again. It adapted a section of the Town Hall basement to store machine guns.

The previous fall, Town Meeting also took an unprecedented step, voting an appropriation to equip men later formed into a machine gun company. This was not a company going to fight in France but rather a unit of the Massachusetts State Guard (M.S.G.).

Fortunately, Winchester's Machine Gun Company was never called upon to defend the town or any other place in the state from foreign threats, but about 100 men in Winchester were trained and committed to do so as part of the State Guard.

When the United States entered the war in 1917, National Guardsmen across the country were called into active military service, leaving the states without home guards in case of emergencies such as possible German invasion, problems with unfriendly foreign residents, labor unrest, and sabotage.

One step to address potential problems was to increase the police forces to deal with issues such as draft evaders or railroad safety. Winchester, in fact, appointed 20 special police officers during the war. And it also contributed a company to the new State Guard.

The M.S.G. began on April 5, 1917, while Winchester's Samuel W. McCall was governor. By January 1918, it comprised three brigades of infantry regiments, four of which had machine gun companies, a motor corps, a troop of cavalry, and a medical department, with a total strength of about 725 officers and 10,800 enlisted men.

State Guard members were generally older men (35+) or others unable to serve in the armed forces. Though older, they had to be fit enough to drill and to march to encampments carrying their equipment. Winchester's group eventually had to manage a 58-pound tripod and 32-pound gun.

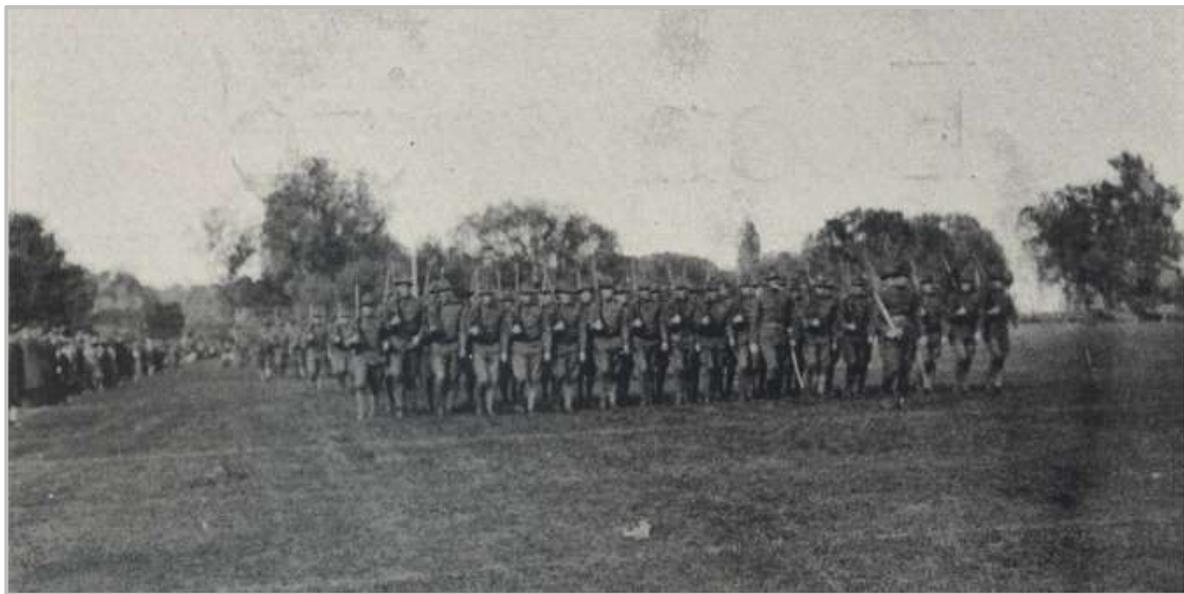


Once the M.S.G. was begun, Winchester immediately recruited a company. On June 6, 1917, it was mustered into service as Company 48. After a few weeks it was assigned as Company F of the 12<sup>th</sup> Regiment. The captain was Maurice C. Tompkins, an engineer, age 35. According to member Harold V. Hovey, "Capt. Tompkins' training made an enviable record in attendance, drills and camp duty."

Edward B. Smalley, a life-long Winchester resident and veteran of the Spanish-American War, was commissioned at age 39 as first lieutenant. After he was promoted to Captain and Adjutant of the 12th Regiment, the 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant was Flavel Shurtleff, a lawyer, age 37, then serving on the Planning Board.

For the duration of 1917, Co. F trained as part of the infantry. In August, the men marched from Town Hall to Wakefield for its first encampment. "Each man was in full marching order and carried a weight of from 40 to 50 pounds, including slickers, a half tent with pegs, canteen, rifle, and personal effects, not forgetting the necessary blanket," the *Winchester Star* reported.<sup>2</sup> Much of its time was spent shooting. In September, Co. F attended its second encampment in Concord, which included not only drills but also engagement with "the enemy."

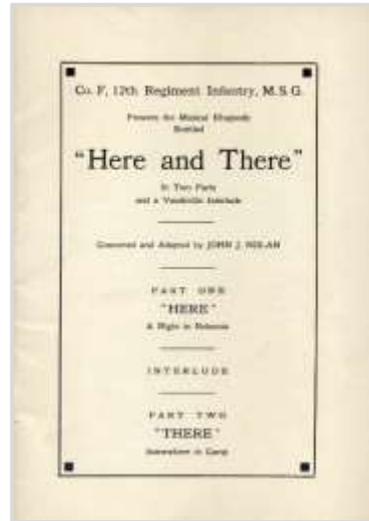
As was required of each company, Winchester's group drilled once a week, sometimes using Manchester Field. The company also offered instruction for drafted men, many of whom received rapid promotion as noncommissioned officers in the national army. It taught not only Boy Scouts but also Girl Scouts how to drill.



The Winchester Company, both as part of the infantry and as a machine gun unit, took on ceremonial duties, ushering at mass public meetings, providing an escort for visiting dignitaries and for Civil War soldiers in the Memorial Day procession, and participating in parades. It also provided a quartet to perform at fund-raisers, the dedication of the service flag at the Methodist Church, and other occasions.

Co. F. was popular in town. People would wave them off enthusiastically for encampments and watch them drill. The men were also seen about town canvassing the town to sell Liberty Loan bonds, especially after they took over the War Camp Community Fund campaign.

In December, the Company occasioned Winchester's first military ball, together with a show, at Town Hall. It sold out and, according to the *Star*, "eclipsed all of our many and excellent entertainments and social functions."



WINCHESTER STATE GUARD SHOW 5

**ATTENTION !**

CAPT. TORREANO    SERGEANT    CORPORAL

**OFFICERS AND MEMBERS  
CO. F, 12th REGIMENT INFANTRY  
MASSACHUSETTS STATE GUARD**

<p>Captain Tremblay, Maurice C. 1st Lieutenant Smalley, Edward H. 2nd Lieutenant Gardner, Elmer 1st Sergeant Bishop, J. Churchill Squad Sergeant Barber, Harry C. Sergeant James, Charles Irving Sergeant Berry, Harold Neal Sergeant Wilson, Kenneth E. Sergeant Mason, Charles A. H. Corporal Stone, Robert M. Corporal Winkler, George A. Corporal Wiggie, Harold Benjamin Corporal Ray, Marcus H. Corporal Fink, George W. Corporal Taylor, Edward E. Corporal Barr, Robert C. Corporal Duester, Henry F. Master Gunner, Harry W. Cook Flynn, William H. Private Elliott, John Private Ashton, Edward L. Private Harris, Louis Wierboom Private Bulmer, Donald B. Private Badger, Paul E. Private Mason, Frank Private Berry, Marshall K. Private Mack, Frank A. Private Eyward, Sidney Cutting Private Dolan, Harry E. Private Hesse, Robert C. Private Dolan, William E. Private Brown, Walter J. Private Bellemare, Frederick J. Private Carter, Robert E. Private Curtis, Preston E. Private Casper, Frank E. Private Chaschick, Everett B. Private Carlin, Charles L.</p>	<p>Private Robinson, Albert Herman Private Dook, C. Harrison Private Berry, Harry E. Private Elliott, James W. Private Plummer, Walter F. Private Fenn, Robert E. Private Adams, Charles Albertson Private Curtis, Herbert Private Hamilton, George H. Private Hawks, F. Nelson Private Brown, Richard F. Private Hurlingham Boy Hart Private Smith, Harry W. Private Harrison, A. Miss Private Harrison, George L., Jr. Private Johnson, John Wilfred Private Sullivan, George W. Private Emsley, Charles E. Private Linn, John L. Private Mann, Clifford H. Private McSwain, Alexander Private Nason, H. Burton Private Newell, Charles E. Private Norman, Harry A. Private Paul, Gardner H. Private Prater, George Clifton Private Richardson, H. Earl Private Richardson, William E. Private Goodrich, Jack Private Gibson, Raymond W. Private Smith, Charles W. Private Stewart, Walter H. Private Thompson, Carlisle Private Thompson, Walter H. Private Tibbitts, Walter J. Private Wino, Edward G. Private Woods, George Adams Private Wilkins, Robert F.</p>
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## MACHINE GUN COMPANY

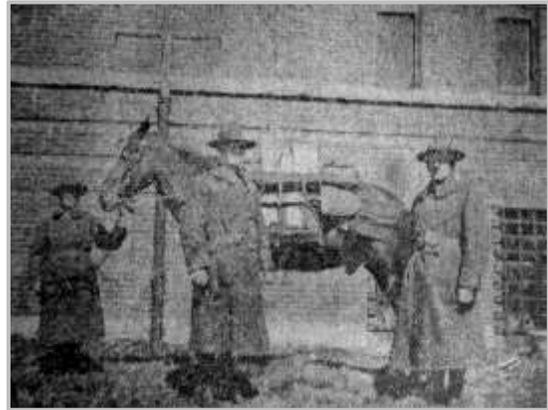
In January 1918, Co. F became the Machine Gun Company of the 12<sup>th</sup> Regiment. According to the *Star*, it was awarded this distinction “through efficiency and preparedness.” A resident presented it with a silk flag, but the change required more equipment, along with more training.

With the country at war, financing equipment for the State Guard could be a challenge. A Special Town Meeting in Sept. 1917 voted an appropriation of \$5,000 which was used to purchase uniforms, tents, cartridges, and other items for Co. F. When the outfit had to add machine guns to its equipment, the Company raised the funds through its own efforts. According to Hovey, “Our Company has won an enviable reputation for efficiency.”<sup>3</sup> It was also notably well equipped.

A *Boston Globe* report of an encampment at Framingham in July 1918 noted, “The Machine Gun Company of the 12th Regiment is probably the best equipped unit ever camping here. The organization hails from Winchester. The citizens of that town raised a fund of \$6,000 as a nucleus for equipment. The company has a battery of four Colt machine guns of the latest model. The guns, mounted on miniature drays, are drawn by horses owned by the company. Each officer and man has two suits of clothing, and all accessories for their comfort, all the company property.”<sup>4</sup>

Robert Barr, a member of the company, described that encampment. “The men started preparations for camp about a month ago—it takes a good deal of time and effort to get 60 odd men and equipment into Camp and out again when a man can spare only 2 or 3 hours a day from his regular business,—but everything went smoothly under the direction of the various officers and non-commissioned officers in charge of the details.” He himself was part of a group assigned to get the horses.

“In the meantime the remainder of the Company had assembled at the Town Hall at 7:15 a.m. Thursday morning. Two large trucks transported the men, and three more trucks handled the gun carts, guns, tripods, and the thousand and one other things necessary to the Company. The men arrived at about 8:30 o'clock.... After being assigned to their tent, the men were kept busy



*Winchester Star* photographs from May 1918, picture Capt. Tompkins, Sgt. Hindes, and Pvt. Benson with one of the machine guns packed on a horse in preparation for the liberty parade and the Company with one of its guns in practice.

until well into the middle of the forenoon getting things into shape. At 10:00 o'clock came the first call to drill. Horses were hitched, equipment placed on the carts, and the men moved out for one hour of drill. At the end of this session came recall from drill, then equipment was cleaned, and about half an hour to wash up and take a long breath before mess-call.

“At 4:15 p. m. came the call to evening parade, and let me tell you, that evening parade opened my eyes to what our new volunteer militia really is. Our Winchester Company has drilled and drilled, and hiked and paraded now and then until I rather got the idea that our Machine Gun Company made up 9-10 of the State Guard. Believe me, that idea was quickly dispelled when I saw those two regiments form in line of battalions and then swing into column of companies past Col. Ballard and his staff. The Winchester Company is one drop in a large bucket. Two Regiments fully equipped, grounded and trained in the various branches of modern warfare, and ready to jump into any form of service at a moment's notice. The people of Massachusetts should feel that their lives and property are well protected against any danger.”<sup>5</sup>



## **CALLED TO SERVE**

As it so happened, the M.S.G. was not called upon to defend the communities of the Commonwealth. The wisdom of preparedness, however, was pointed up when two munitions ships collided and blew up in the Halifax harbor on Dec. 6, 1917, killing over 1,000 and destroying entire neighborhoods. That night M.S.G. medical personnel and equipment were on their way to render aid. In quick order, Winchester contributed nearly \$3,000 through its Halifax Relief Committee.

The Guard was useful in other ways. During the great Spanish Influenza epidemic, the M.S.G. drove ambulances and provided orderly service and guard duty at several hospitals.

When the Massachusetts 26<sup>th</sup> Division returned from France and paraded in Boston in May, the M.S.G. provided crowd control, the Winchester unit being stationed near Huntington Avenue. When Winchester held its own welcome-home parade on the Fourth of July, the Machine Gun Company marched near the head of the parade (as did the few remaining members of the Grand Army of the Republic).

In August 1919, the Machine Gun Company participated in another encampment in Boxford. That September, a group of 62 local men joined the thousands of men from the M.S.G. dispatched by Gov. Calvin Coolidge to Boston to maintain order during the police strike. When they came home, the Winchester men were treated to a dinner at Town Hall.

Following the war, local men continued to volunteer with the State Guard, including some returning military veterans. But mention of the Winchester Machine Gun Company disappears after 1919, possibly due to the reorganization of the National Guard in 1920.

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2019 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on July 23, 2018. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

<sup>2</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Aug.31, 1917.

<sup>3</sup> *The Winchester Star*, March 21, 1919.

<sup>4</sup> *The Boston Globe*, July 26, 1918.

<sup>5</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Aug. 2, 1918.