

Herbert Eva, Colonel, U.S. Army

-- A Man who the Army Forgot --

By Ken Kalish, January 2021

I may have told this story before, but it is about a man who the Army forgot. Herbert Eva, Colonel, U. S. Army.

Eva lived in Duluth in the 1880's and was interested in the military, so he formed a company of infantry in the late 1800's. He bought all the uniforms and weapons, and then presented himself to what would eventually become the Minnesota National Guard. His unit was accepted as Company D, First Minnesota Volunteers and he was given the rank of Captain. Before long, Company D was activated for the Spanish-American War.

The company was sent to Mississippi for training and transportation. Unfortunately, most of the company came down with a disease that may have been malaria. The company was undermanned and unfit for duty, so they were sent home.

Shortly after their return to the Duluth area, they were called up to investigate an apparent 1898 uprising among the Chippewa near what is now Walker, MN. The company, half strength, went west. They set up camp near Leech Lake, directly South of Bear Island and near Bug's home on Sugar Point. Eva asked where the leader, Bagone-giizhig (Bug), was. They told him that Bug was on Bear Island with some of his followers. Eva told the locals where his camp was, and that if Bug wanted to talk to him, Bug could visit the encampment. Eva then told Fort Snelling that he had found Bug, had too small a force to confront him, and was awaiting orders.

Fort Snelling dispatched the First Minnesota to Leech Lake with orders to take Bug into custody. Eva told the Major leading the Fort Snelling troops where Bug was and that it would be very difficult to take Bear Island. The Major dismissed Eva's Company D and began rounding up boats and canoes for his assault on Sugar Point and Bear Island.

When the fight was over the score was Chippewa 16, First Minnesota 1*. (The First's score came when one of the riflemen killed a tribal police officer who was on their side, so that's a qualified kill in that the victim was Chippewa but not qualified because he was killed by friendly fire)

Things were pretty quiet for Eva until 1917 when his unit was called up. Eva's men went for infantry training, but the 50-year-old Eva was promoted to major and selected for Artillery. Off he went to France. When that war ended and he showed up to be mustered out he was told to go home and wait for his discharge.

That discharge never came, but WWII did.

When he received his notice of recall to active duty, the old soldier showed up in uniform with spats and sword. Eva was approaching his middle 70s, but he also had skills America's skinny Army needed. He was promoted to Colonel and assigned to help train artillerymen. When that war ended he was again mustered out with a promise that his separation papers would be sent to him.

Those never arrived.

Korea was the next part of the saga, but when Colonel Eva showed up as directed by his orders he was told to go home, that he would receive his separation orders in the mail. Instead, he

received orders to be a casualty reports officer for the Duluth area along with a Chaplain half his age. After Korea the Army finally let Colonel Eva go, but he wasn't done serving. Eva was named to be a member of the Duluth area draft board #106. He kept that seat until Viet Nam was done.

Eva retired to a nice brick house in East Duluth, a block from the UMD President's house. He kept up his Masonic meetings and eventually hired a nurse to help him around the house. I interviewed Eva on his 102nd birthday. When I showed up at his door he refused me entry, then asked two questions – was I a Mason (not then), was I a veteran (I was), and did I drink brandy (I did). With those affirmative responses, he invited me in for a glass of brandy and an interview. We met occasionally in the years that followed until one Sunday just after his 105th birthday.

Eva was leaving his regular church's morning service. His car (he was still driving) was parked across the street from the church. As he and his nurse crossed the street a car going well over 50 roared toward them. Eva, knowing they were in the car's path, threw his 62-year-old nurse to safety on the curb and took the hit himself. Herbert Vernon Eva, born before the automobile age, died a hero's death because a young man had been drinking all night and was late for work.

Now you know where the phrase "the check's in the mail" came from.