

‘The Polar Bears Are Finally Home’

This year marks the 90th anniversary of the VFWs first large-scale initiative to account for the remains of U.S. troops

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Among many of the VFW’s priorities, advocating for the return of America’s war dead from foreign lands was apparent even in the early days of the 120-year-old veterans’ organization.

In the spring of 1929, members of the Polar Bear Association, a group of veterans of the 339th Infantry Regiment, asked VFW Commander-in-Chief Eugene Carver Jr. (1928-29) if the VFW would help in a grueling mission. The Detroit-based organization of “Polar Bears,” or American Expeditionary Force troops who fought in northern Russia after World War I, needed help recovering the remains of their fellow troops left behind in the Russian tundra the prior decade.

A former VFW Department of Massachusetts commander (1924-25), Carver was an Army veteran who served in WWI as a 1st lieutenant with the 58th Pioneer Infantry Regiment. Carver fought in WWI’s Meuse-Argonne Offensive in France. He knew the importance of the recovery mission and was determined to bring home Americans who fought in Russia against Bolshevik troops, a faction of revolutionary socialists who fought for the communist Red Army.

In 1929, Carver worked with then-Secretary of War Patrick Hurley, a VFW member, to gain access to the Soviet Union for recovery efforts. The Soviets turned down the request, but Carver wasn’t done trying. He approached Soviet officials as a private citizen on behalf of the VFW, which had no political affiliation. The Soviets granted VFW access to the territory and allowed the war veterans to fulfill their proposed expedition.

The VFW Leads the Way

The recovery mission was headed by the VFW’s then-National Legislative Committee Chairman Edwin Bettelheim Jr. The group also included Polar Bears from Lansing, Mich., military archaeologists and other VFW members.

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

After making the journey across the Atlantic by ship and Europe by train, the team arrived in Moscow the first week of August 1929. Officials from the Soviet Union warned the team that they only had until mid-October to complete their mission. Due to the bitter cold Russian winter, the temperatures would make digging extremely difficult — a fact that the team's Polar Bears knew all too well.

The search party members then boarded a train to Archangel, about 370 miles away, where they would search for the war dead. There they split into teams and searched areas where battles took place.

Bettelheim said that the teams traveled along the Dvina, Vaga, Onega, Penega and Yenisei rivers to look for American remains.

"We made our way up the rivers in wood-burning, flat-bottomed boats, drawing about a foot of water, a red-and-yellow VFW pennant flying from the mast," Bettelheim said. "A number of times we slept on the banks of the river where we built bonfires — it was better to sleep on the banks of the river than it was to attempt to sleep in the vermin-infested houses in the villages or cramped in our small boat."

The Americans found many remains in swamps, deserted cemeteries, near cliffs and in graves covered by "a forest of underbrush," Bettelheim said.

"In some instances we had to make two or three separate expeditions to the same locales, offering rewards to peasants before we could get any information as to where American soldiers might be lying," he said.

Two months of searching turned up the remains of 86 Americans. Some were identified by the personal items they carried since most of the dog tags had crumbled to dust. The remains were placed in zinc boxes for transportation.

Journey Back Home

On Oct. 27, the team departed by ship from Leningrad, known today as St. Petersburg, to Le Havre, France. There, the remains of 11 men were handed over to the Army Graves Registration Service to be buried at U.S. military cemeteries across the country. The remaining 75 were then transported to the *SS President Roosevelt* for their last trip across the Atlantic.

The team and the remains returned stateside on Nov. 28, landing at Hoboken, N.J. A 17-gun salute and music from the Army 16th Infantry band greeted them on their arrival. Then-VFW Commander-in-Chief Hezekiah Duff (1929-30) and Senior Vice Commander Paul Wolman also were there to welcome back the team. Duff placed a Buddy Poppy on each casket.

The remains of 17 Polar bears were shipped to their next of kin to locations across the

country, and three were sent to Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia for burial. The remaining 56 were put aboard a funeral train headed for Detroit. The train made stops for special ceremonies in towns and cities in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan. During the entire journey, the VFW members guarded the remains.

‘Detroit’s Own’ Back Home

On Dec. 1, thousands of people gathered at Detroit’s Union Station to welcome home the remains of “Detroit’s Own,” a nickname given to the troops of 339th Infantry Regiment since most were from the area. Duff turned to Michigan Gov. Fred Green, a VFW member and Spanish-American War veteran, and said, “The bodies of these heroes are now before you. They belong to the state of Michigan. The VFW is proud to have participated in this labor of love. The Polar Bears are finally home.”

Although the remains of 88 troops were returned to America, the remains of 41 men were still unaccounted for in Russia. Of those, 14 were recovered by an Army Graves Registration Service team in 1934. The others were never found.

Editor’s Note: Details about VFW’s 1929 recovery mission in northern Russia were taken from VFW: Our First Century by Herbert Molloy Mason Jr. The official history of the VFW’s first 100 years was published in 1999 with extensive contributions by the VFW magazine staff.

This article is featured in the November/December 2019 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.