

Wisconsin National Guard: Bearing the spirit of the nation's flag, Army

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The U.S. Army and Old Glory, both proud representatives of the United States, share the same birthday — if not the same birth date.

The Continental Congress authorized the American Continental Army — which continues today as the United States Army — on June 14, 1775. Exactly two years later, the Continental Congress adopted the flag of the United States.

BJ Cigrand, a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in Fredonia, Wisconsin, arranged the first formal observation of the flag's birthday on June 14, 1885. Cigrand would go on to publish articles enthusiastically advocating for June 14 to be recognized as "Flag Birthday" or "Flag Day."

Another famous Wisconsin resident has a memorable nexus with the U.S. flag and the Army worth retelling on Flag Day and the U.S. Army's birthday.

Arthur MacArthur was an 18-year-old lieutenant with the 24th Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry Regiment during the height of the Civil War. MacArthur's battlefield gallantry had already earned the respect of his older peers. This very gallantry was on full display on Nov. 25, 1863 during the Battle of Missionary Ridge near Chattanooga, Tennessee.

The Army of the Cumberland — to which the 24th Wisconsin was assigned — was ordered to take the Confederate rifle pits at the base of Missionary Ridge. Confusion among Union troops regarding whether they were to stop at the base of the ridge or proceed up the steep hill allowed the Confederates to retreat to the top of the ridge, from where they fired down upon their foes.

Seizing the flag from regiment's the fallen color bearer, MacArthur hoisted the

regimental colors — essentially a square version of Old Glory — over his head, urging his men to follow him up the ridge with the words, “On Wisconsin!” As the 24th Wisconsin made its ascent, other Union units followed. MacArthur reached the crest of the ridge and planted the stars and stripes where all could see.

Union forces successfully dislodged the entrenched Confederates from Missionary Ridge. By day’s end, with rebel troops retreating to Georgia, the Union was in firm control of Chattanooga and the rest of Tennessee.

MacArthur, who would lovingly be referred to as the “boy colonel” before the Civil War ended, earned a Medal of Honor for his actions that day — though he would not see the actual award until 1890. After the Civil War he entered the regular Army and served until 1909, retiring as a lieutenant general. He would serve in the Spanish American War, served as military governor of the Philippines from 1900-01, and was a special observer to the Japanese Army during Japan’s war with Russia in 1905.

MacArthur last saw that regimental flag on Sept. 5, 1912 at a 24th Wisconsin reunion in Milwaukee, where he was the keynote speaker — though by this time his own health was as tattered as the regimental colors. According to the American Battlefield Trust, MacArthur ascended the podium that sweltering evening and said, “Your indomitable regiment,” before collapsing from a massive heart attack. He died moments later, respectfully covered by the very flag he carried up Missionary Ridge nearly half a century earlier.

Today, the Wisconsin National Guard — as part of the primary combat reserve for the U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force — still carries the U.S. flag into combat operations around the globe, as well as into peacetime operations on behalf of both state and federal government.