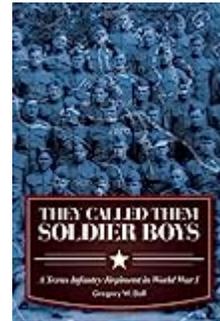




Gregory W. Ball. *They Called Them Soldier Boys: A Texas Infantry Regiment in World War I.* Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2013. xv + 240 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57441-500-1.



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A Texas Regiment in the Great War

Gregory Ball, a historian with the Air Force Office of History, posits two questions in his introduction to *They Called Them Soldier Boys*: who were the Texans who volunteered and fought in France during World War I and how did they experience the war? He seeks answers to these questions in a unique social and military study of a single Texas National Guard regiment, the 7th Texas Infantry. Ball begins with creation of the regiment, follows it through its training and action in France, and then examines the experience of coming home and ultimately, how the war was remembered.

Ball finds that those men from North and Northwest Texas joined the Texas National Guard for a number of reasons. For many patriotism and a sense of duty were factors, but in addition to those more esoteric elements, the desire to serve in hometown units and avoid being drafted into the regular army was just as prevalent, as was the offer of the same pay as a soldier in the Regular Army (p. 3). The two thousand or so members recruited into the 7th were part of the twelve thousand National Guardsmen Texas was authorized to raise and train for

eventual integration into the regular army. The regiment's officers, including its commander, Colonel Alfred W. Bloor, were appointed by the state and were responsible for recruiting.

While recruiting posed a challenge, especially in the more rural and less populated counties, the regiment met its goals. Ball then devotes an entire chapter to examining the socioeconomic background of the soldiers of the 7th. Referencing over a thousand draft registration cards, he details the regiment's demographics, marshaling the usual statistics to include average age (twenty-three for the enlisted soldiers and twenty-seven for the officers), places of birth, and occupations. But more interesting is his analysis: he finds no support for Jeannette King's *Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight* (2004) thesis that a disproportionate number of soldiers came from the lowest economic strata. Rather he finds more support in the 7th's make-up for Gerald Shenk's argument in *Work or Fight!* (2005), that the 7th reflected the vision of the dominant society; young, white, virile men representative of the best. To a great extent, the regiment took on these

characteristics because it was a locally recruited, relatively homogenous National Guard unit.

When officially mustered into federal service in August, 1917, the 7th Texas had 56 officers and 1,952 soldiers. Ordered to Camp Bowie, near Fort Worth, the regiment found it had much to learn. Prior to arrival at the camp, few except the officers had any military training and the introduction to the army way of doing things required much adjustment. In a lively narrative, Ball recounts the 7th's camp life, the soldiers' stories emphasizing themes familiar to anyone familiar with the soldiers' lot. As with many American citizen soldiers, those of the 7th chafed at army discipline regulations; some complained about their officers, others drank too much, and in a number of cases some deserted or went absent without leave. Sickness and training accidents also affected members of the 7th, including a trench mortar accident that killed three and wounded seven. Yet, Ball also finds that many letters and reminisces from the 7th included comments on how well they were fed, remarked favorably on their leadership, and noted how well received they were by the local community. As training continued throughout the late summer and early fall the 7th faced another challenge, reorganization. In September 1917, the 7th was combined with the 1st Oklahoma Infantry to become the 142nd Infantry Regiment, 71st Brigade, of the 36th Division. It would not be the 7th going to war in France, but a larger, amalgamated regiment fleshed out with draftees.

When the 142nd arrived in France it did not join General Pershing's American Expeditionary Force, but was instead loaned as part of its parent 36th Division to the French. In March 1918 the Germans had launched their "Peace Offensive" and though it met with initial tactical success, by the summer it had failed, and with the arrival of the Americans, the dynamic was about to change. Following final preparation at an AEF training area, the

142nd joined the line in September 1918 as part of the 4th French Army. By this time the original 7th numbers had shrunk considerably. Discharges, transfers, sickness, and reclassifications left only 26 of the regiment's 57 officers and 615 of original 1,952 enlisted men.

The 142nd took part in two major attacks, on October 8-10 at St. Etienne and on October 27 at Forest Farm. The first of these was plagued by poor planning, incomplete preparation, and poor coordination. Ball does a good job describing the fighting and highlighting the initiative and bravery shown by the officers and men. The unit came face-to-face with the elephant and achieved its objectives, but suffered 32 percent casualties and had 12 captured by the Germans. But the 142nd learned quickly and in its second battle performed much better, to include executing a successful infantry attack under the cover of a rolling barrage. Ball finds the experience of the 142nd a familiar one for American units: quick adaptation to a war where firepower and limited objectives were the rule and the rifle and maneuver warfare a mirage. By October 30 the 142nd was relieved from the line and spent the remainder of its time in Europe carrying out a rigorous training schedule. Ball also includes an interesting discussion of the POW experiences of those 142nd members captured at St. Etienne.

The men of the 7th Texas returned home to a hero's welcome. Their exploits were celebrated in the newspapers, and most communities organized welcome home events and annual remembrances through the interwar period. Ball does a credible job of following a number of the officers' lives after the war, but less so with the enlisted men. Overall this is a very approachable and interesting social and military history that will appeal to historians of the Great War as well as those interested in the National Guard's experience in integrating with the regular army.

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