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Bucking Tradition

THE WYOMING NATIONAL GUARD'S UBIQUITOUS SYMBOL EMBODIES THE FORCE'S HERITAGE AND ITS ENDURING SPIRIT

BY OFFICER CANDIDATE CHRISTIAN VENHUIZEN

During World War I, Army officials directed units to design an identifying symbol that could be stenciled onto their equipment.

The order reached the Wyoming National Guard's E Battery, 3rd Battalion, 148th Field Artillery Regiment, 66th Field Artillery Brigade when it was on the frontlines in France.

"At this time we were in intensive combat and my battery commander asked me how we could possibly comply with this request," Staff Sgt. George N. Ostrom, the battery supply sergeant and Sheridan, Wyo., cattle rancher wrote in 1973.

"My reply was [for him] to detail me to brigade HQ and this could be done," he said.

The rest is part of Wyoming lore: The battery commander dispatched Sergeant Ostrom to the rear where thoughts of home and the state's feisty frontier spirit inspired his design of a rider on a rough silhouette of a bucking horse.

The commander of the 66th Artillery Brigade was so taken by the concept that he nixed all other drawings and had all brigade equipment marked with the "Bucking Bronco."

State officials were equally enamored of the symbol when the Wyoming Guard returned home to the First Regiment Cavalry, which later became the 115th Cavalry.

Now known as the Bucking Horse and Rider, the symbol, after refinement by Sergeant Ostrom, would become the state's most recognized and treasured trademark. State officials actually copyrighted the mark in 1936.

Today, it appears on every state license plate, on every University of Wyoming football helmet and on every howitzer

EARLY COMBAT Wyoming National Guardsmen drive across France at the end of World War I. On the side of the vehicles is the original "Bucking Bronco" insignia.

and aircraft of the Wyoming National Guard.

The design mustered with the 115th Mechanized Cavalry for World War II. And it graced every 105mm self-propelled howitzer belonging to the 300th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, the 115th's next incarnation, when the unit mobilized for the Korean War.

The "Cowboy Cannoneers" were in the thick of fighting, inflicting "thousands of casualties" on waves of Chinese soldiers at the Battle of Soyang in May 1951, according to accounts.

Their actions helped the 2nd Infantry Division make a stand that allowed the U.S. Eighth Army to regroup and stop an enemy envelopment during a pivotal part of the war.

The 300th left the battlefield as one of the Korean War's most decorated artillery outfits, earning numerous unit citations, 12 Silver Stars, several Bronze Star Medals and 183 Purple Hearts.

But before it even reached Korea, the battalion unknowingly started a Wyoming Army Guard tradition that continues today.

It began with some soldierly mischief on the convoy to Fort Lewis, Wash., the unit's post-mobilization training site.

Upon reaching the Montana border, unit members stole an "Entering Wyoming" highway sign, complete with the bucking horse symbol, displaying it in the battalion area throughout their active duty tour.

The next Wyoming Army Guard unit to deploy overseas followed suit. The 1022nd Medical Company (Air Ambulance), however, legally procured the similar road marker it took to the Persian Gulf for Operation Desert Storm.

When the 1022nd went to Bosnia, another "Entering Wyoming" sign, slightly modified, went with the unit.

Autographed by state leaders and command staff, the company displayed the placard at its headquarters on Eagle Base in Tuzla, Bosnia.

And when the Wyoming Army Guard went to Kuwait, Iraq and Afghanistan, highway signs went with them.

The placards marked the cowboys' claim to a piece of the new frontier. But it was their battle cry that marked the 2nd Battalion, 300th Field Artillery and the 115th Field Artillery Brigade's camaraderie.

'POWDER RIVER, LET 'ER BUCK'

The Powder River winds through portions of northeast Wyoming and Montana, east of the majestic Big Horn Mountains.

As legend has it, "Powder River, let 'er buck" was an 1893 toast to the river's high waters by a Wyoming cattleman.

The state's early militiamen quickly adopted the battle cry but didn't confine its use to the battlefield.

Whenever Wyoming soldiers faced overwhelming odds in the bars of Manila in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War, a cry of "Powder River," answered with "Let 'er buck," meant help was on the way.

The first formal military use of the phrase, however, dates back to the 115th Cavalry in 1924. In 1982, the Army granted the 49th Field Artillery permission to use "Powder River" as its motto.

The 49th is another link in the lineage that connects the First Cavalry to today's 2nd Battalion, 300th Field Artillery (2-300th), which recently returned from northern Iraq, where unit members helped train the fledgling local police across three provinces.

"I admire them," said Capt. Dean Hunhoff of the Iraqi police he trained. "It's a war zone, and they get up every day, put their uniform on, go to work, get shot at, get blown up, their families are threatened, and yet they do it day-in and day-out."

"I tell my family and that I would



Sgt. Billy Brothers

ABOVE Sgt. Chris Walsh and Spc. Ishmael Campbell, members of the 2nd Battalion, 300th Field Artillery, take up security positions in Sinyia, Iraq, Sept. 16, 2006. **RIGHT** A member of an earlier incarnation of the same unit shows off a souvenir from home during the Korean War.



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fight and die for these guys," he said. "They have become great brothers."

An international observer said it was that attitude that enabled Wyoming Guardsmen to succeed where other soldiers had failed.

"The Powder River guys are the first military unit that has come in here and said, 'We are not going to make them Americans.' They treated them as [friends] and didn't bully the Iraqis around, and that's one of the reasons they were so successful," said Richard Castrati, international police liaison officer in northern Iraq.

COWBOYS TAKE FLIGHT

Wyoming's Guard traditions on the ground are only part of the story, however.

The Wyoming Guard saw a need for an Air Guard about a year before the Air National Guard celebrated its official federal birth.

The 187th Fighter Squadron took flight Aug. 10, 1946, giving those cowboys a whole new frontier to tame. And just like the artillery, infantry and cavalry, the new unit needed an insignia, and Wyoming already had one ready to go.

"The silhouetted bucking bronc, powerful and always dangerous, is representative of the mission of the unit," Air Force officials said in approving the emblem in 1953, just two years after the unit mobilized for the Korean War, where eight of pilots died in action.

"Riding the mustang is a bronc-rider, a rough and ready product of the West who tames the mustang to do the job required," it said. "The bronc-buster is likened to the fighter pilots of the squadron, who are always ready to fly their mounts to do the job required."

The logo used was not the same one Sergeant Ostrom originally drew, but one of the subsequent modifications that the state of Wyoming also adopted.

The Wyoming Air Guard kept that insignia on its planes, equipment and even drew a big version of it on the floor of the hangar.

That was all good until acting Wyoming Gov. Doc Rogers told the Wyoming Air Guard that it was the state's horse and the Wyoming Air Guard couldn't use it, or so the story goes.

The Wyoming Air Guard redrew its horse, flipped it around and angled it a bit to see all four legs in 1957.

By 1980, the unit had traded in the fighter mission for airlift ability and took hot iron and "branded" their horse. The brand is called "Wio" or "Flying Wio." It's a real brand designed by Lt. Col. John McCue, a former squadron commander.

Unfortunately, Colonel McCue and his family were killed in an aircraft accident before the brand took flight.

The cowboys, now flying under the 153rd Airlift Wing, are among just four units—all from the reserve component—that operate the Modular Airborne Fire Fighting system.



TECH. SGT. MARVIN PRESTON

Cowboy Air Personnel unload a C-130 belonging to the 187th Airlift Wing in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in 2002.

They've also flown in support of numerous airlift missions around the globe, from Vietnam in the 1960s to current operations in the war on terror.

And because the Wyoming Air Guard has been in the sky for so long, the Air Force transplanted a new batch of cowboys into the mix.

The 153rd is the host wing for an active associate squadron, the 30th Airlift Squadron. The 153rd maintains operational control, making it the first Air Guard unit in the nation to settle that frontier.

Active duty or Guard, they're still flying the Bucking Horse and Rider on every C-130 tail. The Air Guardsmen wear the unit patch and painted a big one on the hanger doors in Cheyenne.

The Wyoming Air Guard also flies the brown and gold colors of the University of Wyoming, which has adopted "Powder River, let 'er buck" as the battle cry for its football team.

NEW FRONTIERS

Just as today's bucking horse has transformed to a more streamlined, high-speed version of Sergeant Ostrom's stenciled World War I brand, the Wyoming Guard is transforming.

The bucking horse-branded howitzers shot for the last time in May as the 2-300th converts to the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, which will be painted with the Bucking Horse and Rider.

And the 115th Field Artillery Brigade will maintain its unit patch while transforming into the 115th Fires Brigade.

The Wyoming Air National Guard's fleet of eight C-130s will grow to 12, and new aircraft will be adorned with the bucking horse on a University of Wyoming brown and gold-ribboned tail.

These distinctive marks show the Wyoming Cowboy Guard saddled up and ready to ride. 🐎

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