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**Foundation**  
*Telling the Army Story...  
one Soldier at a time*

# Voices of the Past

## WORLD WAR I

### Highlights:

- Paul H. Totten joined the Army in May 1918. While most U.S. troops went to France, Totten continued on to join the AEF in North Russia, where the Russian Civil War was raging.
- He mentioned the crippling Russian winter frequently as it prevented both sides from participating in open conflict.
- With a keen eye and dry sense of humor Totten kept detailed notes of the people, places, and events of his service in his diary.
- At this time, there are no known photographs of Paul H. Totten.

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## Against the Soviet Bear: Paul H. Totten & the Polar Bears Go to Russia



The 339<sup>th</sup> Unit Insignia. It translates, "The Bayonet Decides." Image courtesy of the Institute of Heraldry.

**(North Russia, 1918-1919)** Most Americans are unaware that the United States' long conflict with the Soviet Union began before there even was a Soviet Union, when the U.S. Army joined our French and British Allies in their attempt to intervene in the Bolshevik Revolution during the last years of World War I.

When twenty-five year-old Paul Totten from Brooklyn, Michigan, joined the Army in May 1918, he probably envisioned joining the fight in Europe. After completing his training at Camp Custer, MI, he shipped out for England and France as part of the 338th Infantry Regiment in July 1918. Five months later he was transferred to the 339th Infantry, the "Polar Bears", as a replacement in 1st Platoon, F Company, and shipped out for Archangel, Russia.

After the Communist takeover in 1917, Russia made peace with the Central Powers and withdrew from World War I in March 1918. The Eastern Front collapsed, and large numbers of German troops moved to the west to join the fight against the British and French. Desperate to restore the Eastern Front and stem the tide of communism, the two allies agreed to intervene in the Russian Civil War against the communist forces. Reluctantly, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson agreed to send American Soldiers to help.

Totten's early experiences with the Soldier lifestyle in Russia was typical: days of fatigue duty, sick call, construction projects, guard duty, and kitchen patrol. In his off duty time he frequented the local YMCA, saw movies whenever possible, and spent time with his cousins Dwight and Ted Smith, who were assigned to a nearby unit. On November 7, 1918 he wrote:

***"Spent the evening at the Y. Music and dancing to the harmony of the accordion and violin. Kind of took my mind away from the snow."***

Totten also took part in the familiar tradition of Kitchen Patrol, an experience that gave him a little more trouble:

***"On K.P. all day. Not as punishment but just taking our turn. Scalded my good right hand with hot tea at supper time. Reported to infirmary for treatment. More good news today concerning German officers leaving Russia. Might be significant, but we are still praying. My hand commencing to puff and smart." Friday, November 8, 1918***

Although he may not have felt that way at the time, Totten was lucky: this was to be the most severe injury he would suffer during the war.

Like most Soldiers, Totten spent an unusual amount of time thinking and writing about food. He and his comrades engaged in the time-honored practice of supplementing their Army rations with anything they could scrounge. When not pilfering themselves, the Soldiers kept an eye out for anyone else who might be trying their luck, and on one occasion some of Totten's friends caught Soldiers from another unit making "midnight requisitions" and seized the stolen goods. "Sure tasted good. Forbidden fruit always tastes better you know!" he wrote.

Surprisingly, given the amount of ice and snow they encountered, the Soldiers seemed to have trouble finding clean water. Many Soldiers improvised and built boilers to purify their drinking water.

Most of the Polar Bears were from Michigan and were used to cold weather, but Totten's diary indicates that the cold he found in Russia was something else:

***"Between 50 and 60 degrees below zero reported this morning. Couldn't endure more than a few minutes outside. The sensation of exposure to weather in this temperature is really an experience. The minute you step out in it you feel it grab you all over. Just like a frigid shawl, under pressure being suddenly applied to a warm***

***body. Can't take it only for a short spell. But the Ruski's can't take it either so there's no, "charging of the light brigade," on either side. Wrote a few letters and called it square for the day." Tuesday, January 18, 1919***

The weather would continue to amaze the American Soldiers. In May, 1919 Totten wrote:

***"Daylight for twenty-four hours now. The sun rises from out of the South-east and progresses into an immense oval orbit, terminating in the North-west. On clear evenings something happens to color the sky with every color and shape imaginable. It's by far the best show put on here." Saturday, May 31, 1919.***

When not on patrol, Totten made a few rubles on the side as a barber:

***"Price of a hair trim, three rubles. We dealt with Russian money which was of Czarist issue. The three rubles were worth slightly more than twenty-five cents of our money. So, that made a little more spending money for the poor, down trodden barber." Saturday, May 31, 1919.***

On April 11, 1919, Totten experienced what he described as his worst day in his entire experience in Russia. After receiving a Cholera shot that made him ill, he learned from a hometown newspaper article that his sister Ruth had fallen victim to the world-wide flu pandemic.



Co. L. 339th Infantry, embarking on the British transport "Czar" at Economia. This company was part of the first contingent to leave North Russia after wintering at Archangel. Economia, Russia. June 2, 1919. Photo courtesy of the USAHEC, World War I Signal Corps Collection.

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*“Mail arrived, bringing me sorrowful news of my sister Ruth's death due to the relentless epidemic of influenza. I received this notice by way of our home town newspaper -- The Exponent. Am expecting Dad's letter soon. Another disrupting event we had to undergo today was our shot for Cholera. Experienced a terrible back fire. Miserable sick afterward. Had previously been slated for patrol duty but due to the humane action of Lt. Sheridan I was excused. My most heartbreaking day.” Monday, April 7, 1919.*

Throughout his service, Totten remained curious about the events going on around him. Soldiers often catch only the merest glimpses of the lives of the people whose towns and villages they pass through, and Totten wondered about the people, their lives, and what would become of them after he had gone.

The Allied efforts in Russia were a failure, and friction between the American and Allied forces grew worse with time. In February 1919, President Wilson ordered the troops withdrawn, but it was not until June 30 that Totten and his companions boarded the USS *President Grant* bound for home.

### Sources

Paul H. Totten Diary: Tuesday October 1, 1918 to Saturday July 19, 1919. Paul Totten Folder, USAMHI.

Paul Totten Obituary Brooklyn, Michigan Newspaper October 31, 1986.

WWI Veterans Survey: American Expeditionary Forces North Russia. Box 1. Paul Totten Folder. USAMHI.

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“The only American woman on the front where the Americans are fighting in North Russia - - along the line of the Vologda railway - - is Miss Marcia Dunham who is operating a Y.M.C.A. canteen in a railway car in the zone of the advance. The flashlight photograph shows her at the counter of the canteen serving a Poilu (informal term for a French Infantryman) and a Yank.” Photo and caption courtesy of the USAHEC, World War I Signal Corps Collection.



A friendly baseball game on July 4<sup>th</sup>. When the brutal Russian winter ended and free time allowed, Paul H. Totten describes playing baseball a few times in his diary during his time in Russia. Photo courtesy of the USAHEC, World War I Signal Corps Collection.