

As we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the end of the Great War, or WWI if you prefer, it coincides with Veterans Day which began 99 years ago as Armistice Day in celebration of the same event. While we no longer enjoy any living WWI Veterans after losing the last surviving Veteran, Frank Buckles, in 2011 Oregon does enjoy a unique connection to WWI in the contributions of an Oregonian named Walter Waters.

The government of the United States was unprepared for the return of the millions of WWI veterans who would be coming home and re-entering their civilian life. The American economy was not that good to begin with and it would create an additional drain to attempt to structure some type of post-service support or pay system. Oregon too was concerned with the financial well-being of our returning Vets and attempts were made in 1921 to provide economic relief. But the stock market crash in 1929 dashed the hopes of all efforts to provide any relief either state-level or federal. Soon, hundreds of thousands WWI Veterans were demanding compensation of some sort and were calling on Washington DC to perform.

Native Oregonian Walter Waters had been groomed for leadership it seemed. He had served in the Idaho National Guard and gained fighting experience in Mexico chasing Pancho Villa. Returning to Oregon, he joined the Oregon National Guard and saw service in France during the Great War. But after the war he struggled to find work just like the other Veterans and when the movement began to pressure Washington DC, he mobilized what was originally called the Bonus Expeditionary Force and in May 1932 they started their march to our nation's capital to pressure the federal government into action. By the time they arrived, over 20,000 Veterans had joined in and camped on the Capitol Grounds and eventually established a 'Hooverville' just blocks away. Waters established conduct code, streets and sanitation facilities, and required proof of service for Veterans wishing to join them.

President Herbert Hoover, who, as a young boy, had lived with an uncle in Newberg, Oregon, didn't appreciate the pressure nor the presence of the disgruntled Veterans and refused to meet with them or address their demands. The Bonus Army became more agitated and demanding. Hoover eventually called in the regular Army to disperse the Veterans from the Capitol, and gave the command to General Douglas MacArthur, then Chief of Staff. Major Dwight D. Eisenhower was his aid, and Major General George Patton led the cavalry: three up and coming military leaders who would come to prominence a decade later. While six hundred troops moved in with bayonets and tear gas, six tanks staged on Pennsylvania Avenue. At first the Bonus Army members thought the troops were marching in support, until they turned against them. After the initial assault, Hoover had twice sent MacArthur orders to stop, but MacArthur ignored the orders and exceeded his authority, and launched the attack on the encampment. By the time the melee was over, area hospitals were filled with injured, two men and two infants were dead.

In the aftermath, the incident would have various effects on all of the major players, not to mention the Bonus Army members themselves. Hoover, already facing a tough re-election with the sour economy, literally handed FDR the election with the public outcry over the incident. Patton, while he went on to establish himself as a great tactician and commanding officer during WWII, called the incident a "most distasteful form

of service". MacArthur would go on to what seemed to be an ever-escalating and promising career, but his propensity to insubordination with his superiors would be his ultimate down fall. And while Eisenhower actually wrote the official incident report which endorsed MacArthur's conduct, at the time of the incident he was quoted as saying about MacArthur's role: "I told him it was no place for the Chief of Staff."

As for Walter Waters, after the incident was over, he returned to the west coast and relative obscurity. He enlisted in the Navy during WWII and served his country again despite the treatment he and other WWI Veterans had received. He died in 1959 while residing in Washington State.

The Oregon Coast Military Museum is located on Kingwood Street adjacent to the Florence Municipal Airport, and is open from noon to 4:00 p.m. Wednesday thru Sunday. You can learn more about military heritage by visiting the Museum's website at www.oregoncoastmilitarymuseum.com.