

PERSHING RIFLES

What do General Colin Powell, former Secretary of State, General Curtis Le May, AF Chief of Staff, LTC Elvis Stahr, Secretary of the Army, General Hugh Shelton, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Nelson Gibbs, Asst Secretary, US Air Force, LTG Paul Mikolashek, US Army Inspector General, General Jack Keane US Army Vice Chief of Staff, James Earl Jones, Actor, G. Gordon Liddy, Radio Show host all have in common? The majority are recognizably highly ranked military leaders. They are all Alumni of The National Society of Pershing Rifles.

“To foster a spirit of friendship and cooperation among men in the military & maintain a highly efficient drill company”.

This is the purpose of the Pershing Rifles, as promulgated by 2 LT John J. Pershing, the Professor of Military Science and Tactics at the University of Nebraska, at Lincoln in 1891. Thus, Company A, as he called it was formed from a select group of ROTC students. In 1892, this company, entered and won the maiden competition at the Omaha Competition.. In 1893 the unit became a fraternal organization bearing the name of “Varsity Rifles”. In 1894, in appreciation of his efforts and to honor him, the name was changed to “Pershing Rifles”. In 1895 when Pershing left Nebraska, at the request of a committee, he gave the company a pair of his cavalry breeches. These breeches were cut into small pieces and were worn on the uniform as a sign of membership. These “ribbons” were the first service ribbons ever worn in the United States.

During the Spanish American War, thirty members of the now powerful Pershing Rifles enlisted in the Nebraska Volunteers. W.H. Oury, Captain of the Pershing Rifles, now a full Colonel in the Regular Army was placed in command. Another Pershing Rifleman by the name of Robbins was made the First Sergeant. He later achieved a high position in the War Department. Every one of the thirty distinguished himself in the ensuing battles.

From 1901 to 1911, Pershing Rifles enjoyed a growing strength and the height of its existence prior to World War Two. Membership was a great honor and the group was one of the most important features of the Nebraska military and social life. After 1911 the organization suddenly lost prestige and declined deplorably. In 1920 the organization was reborn with the establishing of a corps with new life and activity. By 1924, it had regained some of the lost prestige. Special Drill companies from all over the country began to seek admission into the group.

The present National Honor Society of Pershing Rifles owes its existence to a group of advanced course men who got together in Autumn of 1922 and formed “The President’s Guard”, named in honor of William Overly Thompson, President of Ohio State University. After an exhibition of drill in the spring of 1923, the organization “drifted” until the spring of 1925 when they applied for affiliation with the Pershing Rifles, after realizing a need to create a stronger group. Initially rebuffed, after negotiations which took over a year and a threat to form a national group without them, Ohio State was chartered as A-1 on May 22, 1925 by the Colonel of Pershing Rifles.

From 1928 when the National Headquarters was established at the University of Nebraska the Society grew tremendously. At its peak during the 1950s there was an organization consisting of almost twenty Regiments with over 170 Active Units. If an average of 40 members per unit is used, that year there were 680 active members.

During the Vietnam Era, the popularity of the Society declined along with the public opinion of the military in general. Many units were inactivated as the organization declined to a mere shadow of itself. Since the early 1990s the Society has slowly built itself into a viable national organization. Aided by Professors of Military, Air and Naval Science, Pershing Rifles Alumni themselves, the organization grew until in 2004 there were sixty chartered units with a viable National Headquarters. Coincidentally, as part of this growth many Alumni have rediscovered the National group and have begun to participate in assisting with the growth. General of the Armies John J Pershing would be proud to see the growth of the Society he founded.

When I was initiated into Company E-8, New York University in January 1959, there were only male ROTC members. Since that time female members have been welcomed, and in fact have served as National Commander. We recently wondered how many USAA members were also Pershing Rifles Alumni. Our unit was retired in 1974 because ROTC was discontinued at NYU. Our E-8 Alumni Association is composed of some 230 members, and I estimate that 120 are USAA members, not including children as members. Company Q-8, Hofstra University in New York, still has an active unit, with almost 500 members. They estimate 350 are USAA members. Company A-8, Colin Powell's unit, has 300 members, of which it is estimated over 80 are USAA members.

On March 13, 2008, the Pershing Rifles National Convention is scheduled to be held in Daytona Beach, FL. In addition, on March 15, the John J Pershing National Drill Meet will be held at Embry Riddle Aeronautical University, a unit that was chartered in March, 2006. In conjunction with that, there will be a National Alumni Reunion. Information is available online, at www.PershingRiflesSociety.org.