

Winter 2014

Vol. 27, No. 1

History of the 2nd Division in World War I (Part 1)

by Don Simpson

Which Army division once included US Marine combat units and was commanded by a USMC Major General? If you answered the 2nd Infantry Division you would be correct.

The 2nd Division was born in World War I; approved on 20 September 1917, by the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Tasker Bliss. On 26 October 1917, the division headquarters opened at Bourmont, France, under the command of the senior officer present, Brigadier General Charles A. Doyen, USMC, the commander of the 4th Marine Brigade. Two weeks later, the designated commander, Major General Omar Bundy, US Army, arrived in France and assumed command from BG Doyen.

The United States declared war against Germany on 6 April 1917. By then, France and Great Britain had been fighting Germany on the Western Front since August 1914.

All three nations were near exhaustion from two and one half years of trench warfare. The war was stalemated with the opposing forces facing each other from a series of vast trench lines separated by a deadly space known as No Man's Land. The trench line ran south from Nieuport, Belgium, on the English Channel to vicinity of Reims, France, eighty miles north-northeast of Paris; then east another eighty miles to Verdun. From Verdun, the trench line ran south-southeast another 170 miles to the Swiss border. There was a thirty mile deep salient or bulge in the allied line at St. Mihiel. The British occupied the trench line on the west, the French on the east.



A British recruiting poster

French poster commemorating the "Victors of the Marne"

German Patriotic Poster

Remembering the Great War

President's Report

The year 2014 marks the Centennial of the start of the First World War, known at the time as "The Great War." Although the United States did not enter the war until 1917, the events of the war were of great interest to the citizens of America.

As the war progressed, the US Government realized that we were likely to get drawn into the war and began to explore areas to locate training camps. Of course, one of the areas was American Lake, Washington; soon to become Camp Lewis.

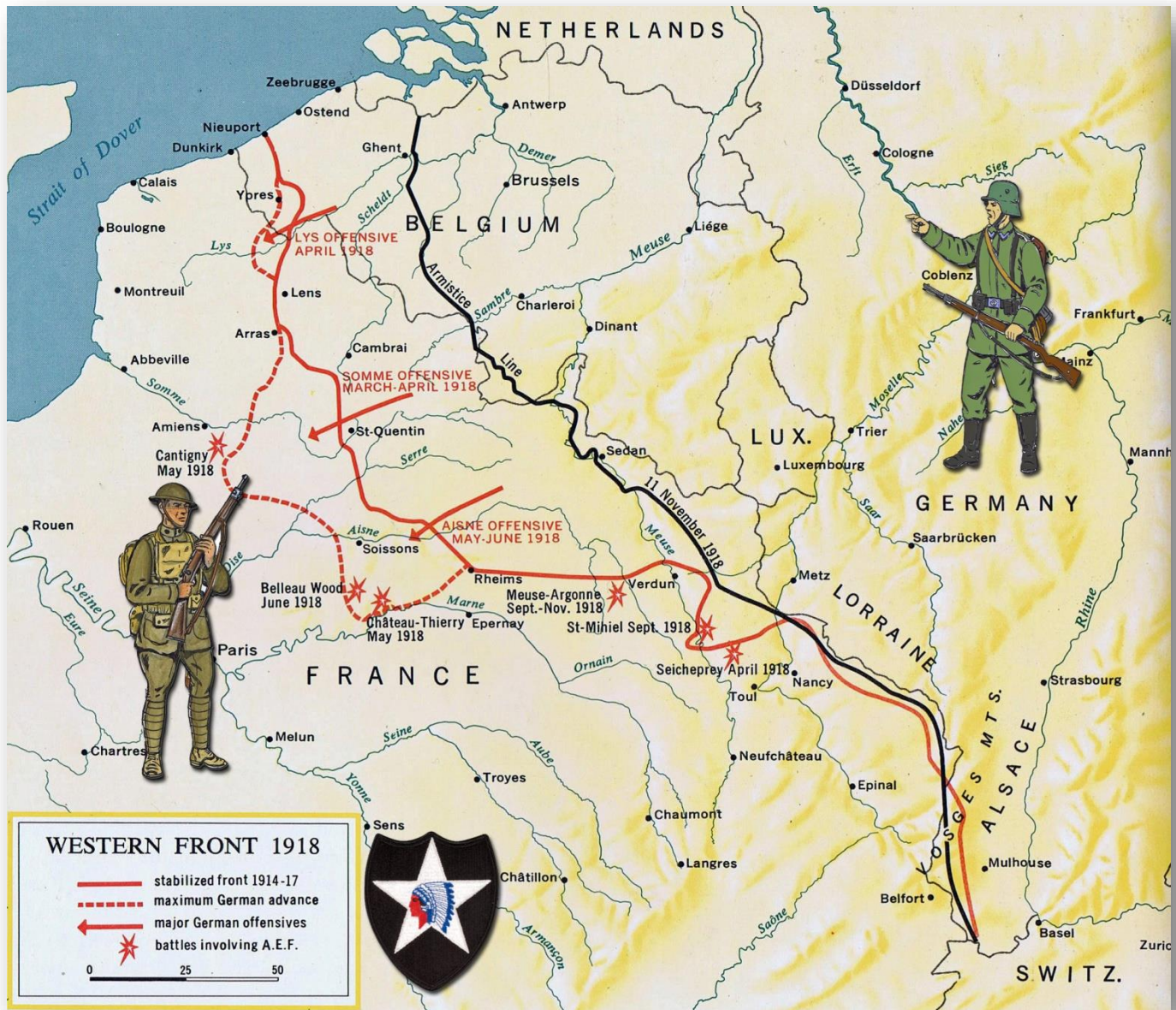
Over the next four years, articles dealing with the history of The Great War are planned for publication in *The Banner*. The first, on the history of the 2nd Division in World War I, by LTC (retired) Don Simpson, appears in this issue.

As we begin the New Year, we look forward to continuing to provide support to our museum and help keep history alive on JBLM.

Our first Membership Meeting for 2014 is scheduled for 26 January at Patriot's Landing. Our speaker will be Major General Kenneth R. Dahl, Deputy Commanding General, I Corps, Joint Base Lewis-McChord. General Dahl is a graduate of the United States Military Academy and was commissioned as an officer in the Field Artillery in 1982.

Major General Dahl has served in a number of important positions including tours in Iraq, Afghanistan, Germany, and Korea. Please join us on 26 January to meet General Dahl and learn about I Corps' important mission.

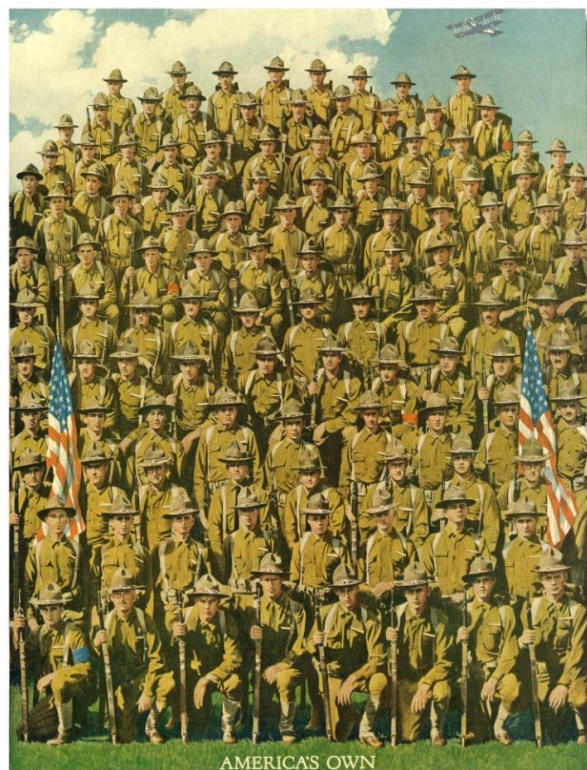
Ian Larson



The first Americans to arrive in France in late June, 1917, were the Army's 1st Division and the 5th Marine Regiment; approximately 20,000 men, led by General John J. Pershing, the Commander of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF). At a ceremony at the tomb of Marquis de Lafayette on 4 July 1917, Colonel Charles E. Stanton, speaking for General Pershing, gave a stem-winding speech that concluded with the words, "Lafayette, We Are Here!;" words that were to become a rallying cry for the Americans in France. From this small contingent of 20,000, the AEF would grow to over 2,000,000 men before the war was over.

The 2nd Division, like all US divisions in France, was organized as a "Square" Division with four infantry regiments and a strength of nearly 28,000 men. The smaller French and British divisions numbered 12,000 and 15,000 respectively, and had a triangular organization with three infantry regiments. General Pershing wanted large divisions with considerable staying power; particularly in the offense. The fighting strength was formed around two brigades of two infantry regiments and one machine gun battalion each. An artillery brigade of two regiments of field guns and one of howitzers would provide indirect fire support. The division also consisted of an engineer regiment and various other combat support and combat service support units.

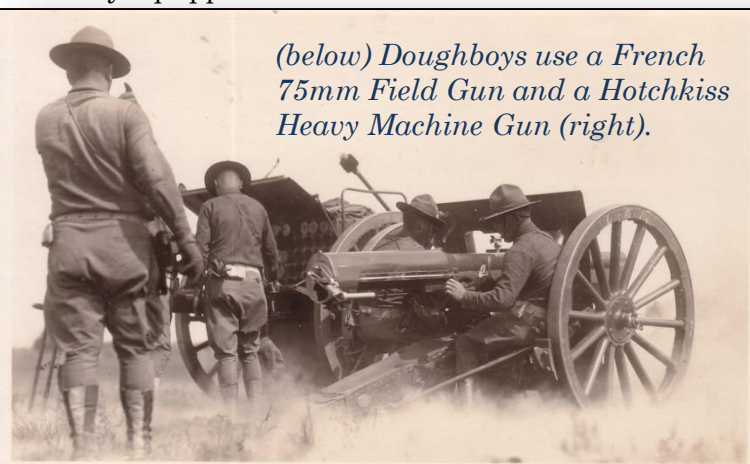
The Third Infantry Brigade consisted of the 9th Infantry Regiment, the 23rd Infantry Regiment and the 5th Machine Gun Battalion. The Fourth Marine Brigade consisted of the 5th and 6th Marine Regiments and the 6th Machine Gun Battalion. The 2nd Artillery Brigade included the 12th and 15th Artillery Regiments equipped with 75mm Field Guns; the 17th Artillery Regiment equipped with 155mm Howitzers and the 4th Trench Mortar Battery equipped with 6" Newton Mortars.



Each infantry regiment consisted of three battalions of four companies each. Each company had four fifty man platoons. The 75mm Gun regiments in the artillery brigade had three battalions; each consisting of two four gun batteries. The 155mm Howitzer regiment was organized with two battalions of three four gun batteries. The total artillery pieces in the division were forty-eight 75mm Guns and twenty-four 155mm Howitzers. The trench mortar battery was equipped with twelve 6" Newton trench mortars. Additionally, each infantry regiment had six 3" Stokes mortars.

Reflecting the importance of the machine gun, there were fourteen machine gun companies in the division with a total of 260 Hotchkiss heavy machine guns obtained from the French. Each Brigade had a four company MG battalion,; each regiment, a MG company. A two company MG battalion was retained under division control.

(below) Doughboys use a French 75mm Field Gun and a Hotchkiss Heavy Machine Gun (right).





the Allied and German trenches, seeking information or to capture a German soldier or officer. In response, the Germans conducted artillery bombardments, gas attacks and trench raids against the division.

Trench living had its drawbacks. The dugouts where the men slept were infested with rats and lice or “Cooties” as the doughboys referred to these little critters. Ingenious methods were devised to get rid of cooties. One soldier determined that you should sprinkle salt all over your clothes, then find a lake or pond, take off all your clothes and allow the little critters to run into the water to quench their thirst. While the cooties were drinking, the soldier was to grab his clothes and run! Not sure that technique worked.

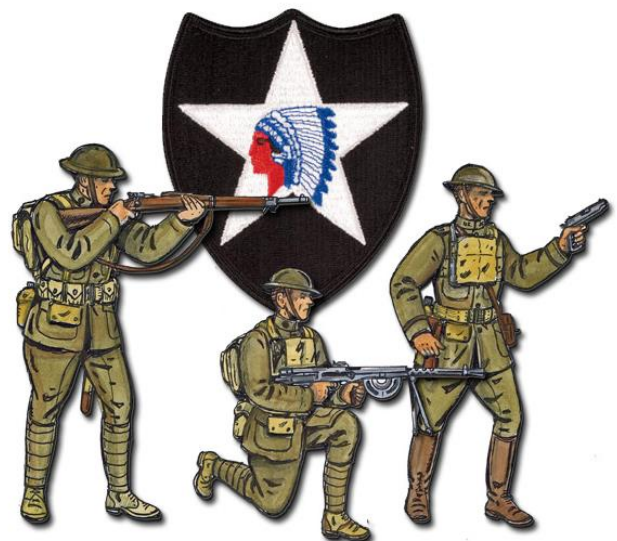
During March, 1918, the commander of the division trains noticed that French units had identifying symbols on their vehicles. He held a contest to select a distinctive symbol to identify the vehicles of the trains. As an incentive, a prize of forty francs was to be given to the winning design.

The winner was a red and blue Indianhead, superimposed on a white star. Later, this design was adopted by the entire division. However, each major unit had a separate indentifying background. Finally, in 1933, the division commander at the time abolished the practice of each major unit having a separate background and directed that the black shield used by the division headquarters be used division-wide. To this day, the 2nd Infantry Division insignia worn on the shoulder of all “Indianhead” soldiers is one of the most distinctive in the Army.

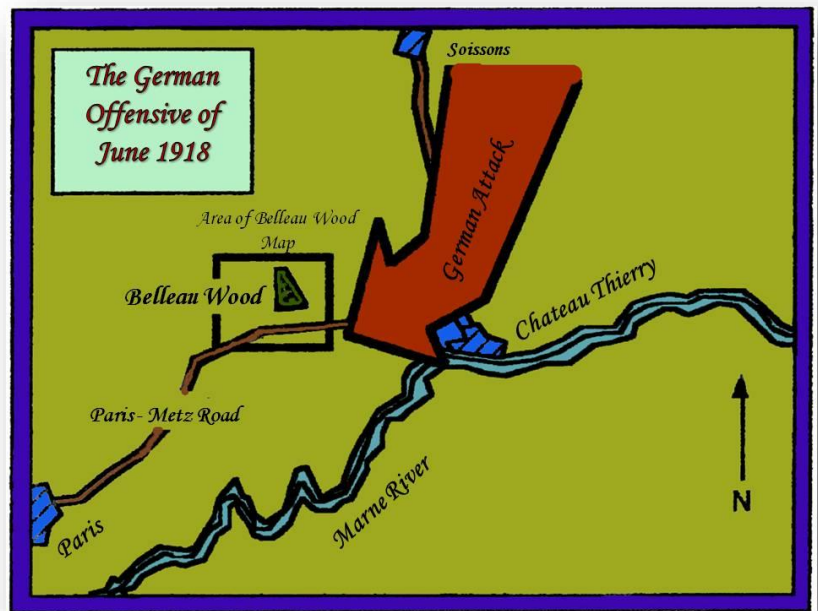
The maneuver brigades could deploy with one Brigade in the lead and the other brigade following in support and prepared to attack through the lead brigade in order to maintain the momentum of the attack. The French and British divisions were less capable of sustaining the offensive with only three regiments. Fortunately, the Americans had the manpower to form the larger divisions whereas the French and British did not. However, because our industrial capacity had not been mobilized prior to the declaration of war, the Americans lacked sufficient weapons and equipment. Those items were purchased from the French and British.

For the first six months, the division was involved in organization and training. Like all American units, the 2nd Division was green as grass. The AEF established special leadership schools for officers and non-commissioned officers. Initially, units concentrated on squad, platoon and company level training while located in the Bourmont area. In March 1918, the division entered training at the battalion level and entered the trench line near Verdun, France, under the French X Corps. This phase of training was designed to provide exposure to combat at little risk. The French referred to this trench line as a “Bon Sector”; very quiet. There was an accommodation with the Germans; “You don’t shoot at me and I won’t shoot at you.”

The Americans immediately changed the dynamic by their aggressive behavior. Snipers shot at German officers and soldiers in their trenches. Patrols went out every night into No Man’s Land, that awful area between



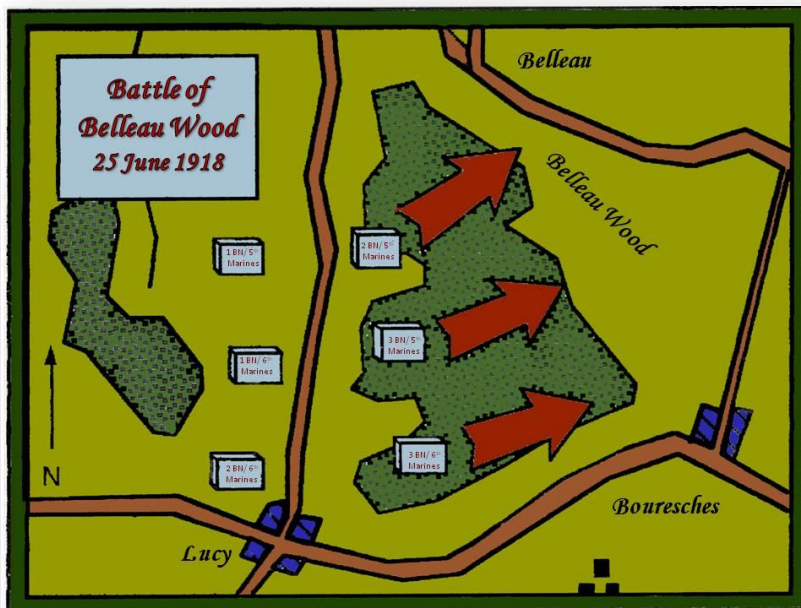
On 21 March 1918, the Germans launched the first of five separate offensives against the French and British lines. General Erich Ludendorff, the German Commander -In-Chief, hoped to knock both the British and French out of the war before the build up of American forces was too great to overcome. By this time, close to 300,000 Americans were in France, but few units were prepared to engage in offensive combat; however, more were arriving every day. In actuality, 1,000,000 Americans would be in France by the end of June, 1918. If the Germans were to ever prevail, they had to deliver the knock out blow now.



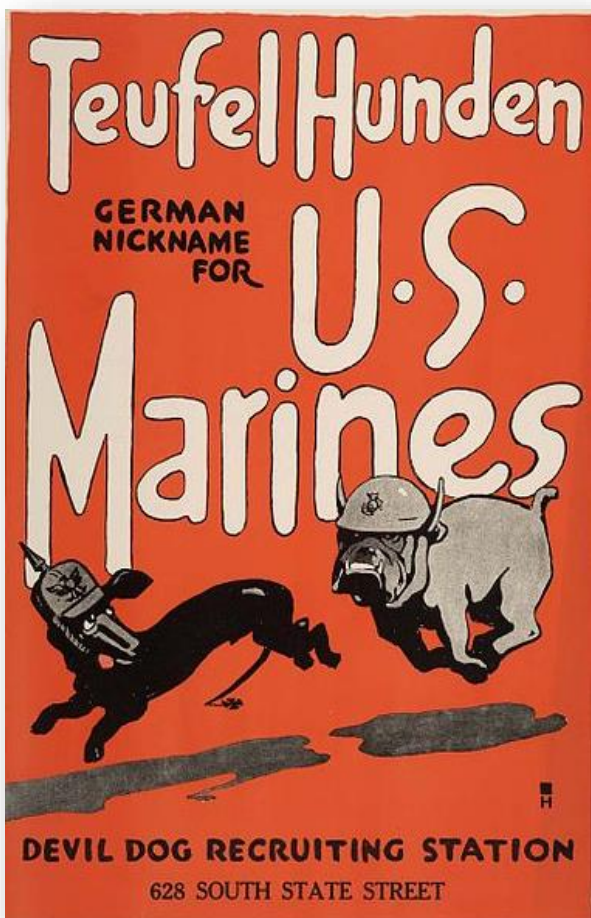
In June, the 2nd Division was called on to stop the third phase of Ludendorff's offensive near Chateau Thierry, approximately fifty-five miles east of Paris. Along with the 3rd Division, they went into positions north and south of the Marne River. The 2nd went into positions oriented toward the east with the 4th Marine Brigade on the left facing a wooded area known as Belleau Woods and the 3rd Infantry Brigade astride the main road between Paris and Metz. The French Corps Commander asked if the Americans were capable of holding the line. The division chief of staff, Colonel Preston Brown, replied, "General, these are American regulars. In a hundred and fifty years they have never been beaten. They will hold."

As the Marine Brigade was moving into defensive positions on 3 June, a French officer delivered a withdrawal order to the adjutant of the 51st Company. The order was countermanded by the senior officer present, Captain Lloyd W. Williams, who according to his officers and men, said to the French officer, "Retreat, Hell! We just got here!" The following day, 4 June, a German attack was stopped by the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. This was the Germans farthest advance.

On 5 June, the 2nd received an order to clear the Belleau Woods forward of the Marine Brigade. The Marines, then commanded by an Army officer, Brigadier General James Harbord, were given the mission. The attack was not well planned and the tactics used were antiquated. The Marines marched into devastating machine gun and artillery fire in four lines of skirmishers, bayonets fixed, and rifles at high port. Casualties were high and the Marines barely gained a foothold. Subsequent attacks continued over the next three weeks until the entire Belleau Woods was finally cleared on 25 June. Over 5,000 Marines were casualties.



The Marines in World War I were known to the Germans as "Teufelhunden" or "Devil Dogs". Allegedly it came from a German officer's description of their savage fighting abilities during the battle in the Belleau Woods. However, the first reference to "Devil Dogs" came in an article in the Chicago Tribune in April, 1918, two months prior to the Belleau Woods fight. Could the term have possibly been dreamed up by a war correspondent or a Marine public relations man? At any rate, it remains today as a term of respect for a serving Marine.



*Above:
Marine Corps recruiting poster
featuring
the "Devil Dog" Nickname.*

*Top Right:
Two veteran Marines with
2nd Division shoulder sleeve insignia
pose with souvenir pets.*

Meanwhile, the 3rd Infantry Brigade remained in a defensive posture for most of the month of June. On 8 June, they received a heavy artillery barrage and ground attack across the entire brigade front which was repulsed. German attacks slacked off after this, but the artillery bombardments continued. The brigade received a heavy mustard gas attack on 24 June that resulted in 339 casualties.

On 30 June, 3rd Brigade was ordered to attack east to seize the town of Vaux and the surrounding area. The attack commenced at 1800 hours with the infantry moving forward behind a rolling barrage. The Germans were in bad shape and within one hour all objectives had been seized. A series of German counterattacks failed. This attack effectively completed the 2nd Division mission in the Chateau Thierry Sector. On 7 July, the division was relieved by the 26th "Yankee" Division and pulled off the line. The division had suffered 7,876 casualties during this operation. Mission planning and execution left much to be desired and resulted in heavy casualties, particularly in the Marine Brigade. However, the Americans fought courageously and achieved their objectives. This operation signaled the beginning of the end for the Germans. Equally important was the positive impact made on the morale of the French population. From this point on the Allies went on the offensive until the end of the War.

To be continued in the Spring issue of *The Banner*

FRIENDS OF THE FORT LEWIS MILITARY MUSEUM

GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

26 JANUARY 2014

Place: **Patriots Landing, Olympic Dining Room**

Time: 1130-1215 Social Hour

1215-1330 Brunch

1330-1415 Program



We are honored to announce that the speaker at our next General Membership Meeting will be Major General Kenneth R. Dahl, Deputy Commanding General, I Corps, Joint Base Lewis-McChord. We know all our Museum Friends are eager to hear what changes and challenges are in store for I Corps and the Army in the coming years. Our distinguished guest will address these issues and others related to the future of Joint Base Lewis-McChord and the United States Army.

Please join us to hear our guest speak on topics very important to I Corps, JBLM, and the entire military community.

Please return your reservation form and check by Thursday, 23 January 2014.
minute reservations may be made by calling Paul Knoop at (253) 279-2598.

Last

Return this form to LTC (Ret) Donald A Simpson, 6615 79th Street W
Lakewood, WA 98499. Make checks payable to "The Friends."
Cost of Brunch for members and guests: \$16.00 each.

Number of Reservations: _____ Total Amount Enclosed: _____

Name of Member: _____ Telephone Number: _____

Names of Guests: _____

Residents of Patriot's Landing do not need to make payment for the meeting, but are requested to make reservations for seating.

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<http://www.fortlewismuseum.com>

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and Keep History Alive!**



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