

Officers of the First Division Dinner

By COL (Ret) Greg Fontenot

The officers of the 1st Infantry Division “The Big Red One” will convene for the 97th edition of the Officers of the 1st Division Dinner on 30 April 2016. The first Dinner occurred in 1920 as nearly as can be determined. Tribal wisdom, the kind most heard in regimental CPs, claims the first Dinner occurred in 1919. For that matter the Bridgehead Sentinel has so reported in the past. Just when the first dinner occurred is actually uncertain. General Paul F. Gorman, arguably the foremost authority on the Dinner, gave remarks on the history of the dinner on the occasion of the 88th dinner in 2007.

Some of the points he made bear repetition as a reminder of the history and a caution for the future and to dispel myths. General Gorman carefully researched the history only to learn there are few records to examine. Perhaps that is as it should be since it appears three WW I junior officers organized the first dinner held in New York City in 1920. They were not concerned with establishing a tradition now nearly 100 years old but rather with providing “an opportunity for other veteran combat officers of the “Fighting First” to meet at dinner as they had been doing at luncheon to see wartime friends and recall their experiences.”

CPT Shipley Thomas a veteran of the 26th Infantry Regiment who published History of the AEF in 1920 played a leading role

in founding the Dinner. For all of us who believed the Dinner was held at the Waldorf Astoria until it moved to Alexandria the program for the 10th Dinner is instructive. The Commodore Hotel in New York City hosted the 10th Dinner on March 9, 1929. General Charles P. Summerall was the senior officer who attended that night. Summerall, who commanded the division in WWI, was then serving as Chief of Staff of the Army. George C. Marshall attended as well. General Gorman unearthed another interesting piece of history in the form of a film showing a 1st Division Dinner held at Sagamore Hill in Long Island. Teddy Roosevelt, Jr, hosted the dinner.

A great deal has changed since the first Dinner, whenever that was. What began as a gathering of men who served together in WWI and the occupation, that appears may have included tossing lemon tarts at one another, has transformed fundamentally. The Dinner is now a tax exempt organization with a set of bylaws and traditions some of which have little foundation in the way the Dinner began. That is as it should be. The country and its Army have changed. The men who met for Dinner in 1929 were born before the first flight; those who attend for the first time this year were born long after the Neil Armstrong strode the surface of the moon. The 1st Division fought WWI with four infantry regiments orga-

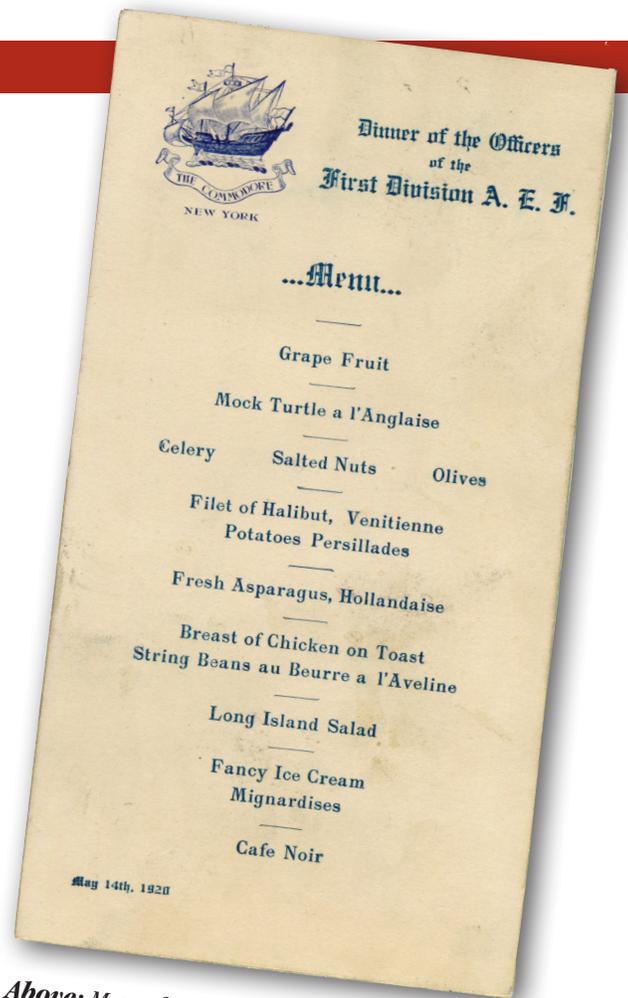
nized in two brigades supported by an artillery brigade. All of these regiments were Regular Army formations. Since that time echelons have come and gone. Regiments have moved in and out. What has remained constant is the basis of the Dinner- a combat veteran association with the 1st Division.

The Officers’ Dinner remains one of the great traditions of the 1st Division. Events begin on Friday, 29 April 2016, at 1700 when the regimental CPs, or as they were once called Postes de Commands, open. On Saturday some officers will visit the Division Monument across from the Old Executive Office Building to recall those who gave their lives. At noon, a chili luncheon will be offered in the Division Command

Post on the 29th floor of the Alexandria Mark Center Hilton Hotel. That evening at 1800 formal activities will begin with a cocktail reception followed by dinner.

This year the Dinner will celebrate the 25th Anniversary of Desert Storm. LTG (Ret) Thomas G. Rhame will offer remarks on the Division’s operations in that war. MG Wayne R. Grigsby, a Big Red One combat veteran and current commanding general, will brief the State of the Division to the officers.

Combat veteran officers, their spouses and a limited number of guests may attend the dinner. Full details and contact information are available at the event website: dangerforward.org. ■



Above: Menu from the 1920 First Division Officers Dinner held at the Commodore Hotel in New York City.