Montana's remarkable representation in World War I history can largely be traced to a federal mistake, Montana led all states, per capita, with a total of 11,700 volunteers under arms during the Great War, including a 14-year-old boy from Butte, Mike Mansfield, who lied to get into the Navy and later went on to become the longest-serving Majority Leader in the U.S. Senate. The federal mistake was an incorrect population estimate that drafted an additional 27,367 Montana men during the war. Thus, in addition to leading the nation in per-capita combat deaths, Montana produced more than 35,000 veterans who came home to charter American Legion posts in nearly every community of the state. The American Legion Department of Montana has 132 active posts, including one in Calgary, Alberta.

Montana Legionnaires

Charles E. Paw, Helena, Montana's first department commander, Paw became a national leader in The American Legion's Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation program, pioneering the organization's service officer program and pushing Washington to pass the Rogers Act to build badly needed veterans hospitals nationwide.

James F. Barknecke, a Legionnaire for more than 70 years, flew 70 missions from the USS Yorktown in the Pacific Theater of World War II. He later joined the Montana Army National Guard and led the 163rd Infantry Regiment and the Aviation Company of the 163rd Armored Cavalry.

Ryan Zinke, American Legion Boys State alum, became the first Navy SEAL elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2014. In Operation Iraq Freedom, he was deputy and acting commander, Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Arabian Peninsula, leading more than 3,500 troops.

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Helen Dawson, a Navy clerk at Pearl Harbor during World War II, started the first all-women's American Legion post in Helena following her discharge.

Highway Fatality Marker program

In 1922, Hellgate Post 27 Legionnaire Floyd Eberhart was deeply troubled by an unusually high Labor Day weekend fatality report: six lives lost in automobile crashes in the Missoula area alone. Thus, was born The American Legion White Marker Highway Fatality Program. It started out as a local effort to identify with white crosses the locations of fatal crashes in an effort to remind drivers to slow down and pay close attention to the road. The following year, the program was formally adopted by the Montana Highway Commission, with the blessing of Gov. J. Hugo Aronsen.

Originally called the White Cross Safety Program, it soon was adopted across The American Legion's Department of Montana. Most American Legion posts across the state participate, and more than 2,000 markers line the highways. The program was not officially acknowledged by the state until a 2001 letter of instruction about how to paint and maintain the markers came from Montana Department of Transportation Director Jim Lynch.

Later renamed the Highway Fatality Marker program, it was promoted on the official Montana Highway Map starting in 2007 under the heading: “White markers show fatalities and serve as a reminder to drive safely, drive sober and wear seat belts. LEARN FROM THOSE WHO PASSED THIS WAY.” Lynch later approved signs explaining the program and acknowledging The American Legion of Montana. American Legion posts furnish, install and maintain the markers throughout the state.

Roadside attractions under the big sky

Sons of The American Legion Squadron 16 in Lewistown helped lead the restoration and display of a Minuteman I—known locally as “the lonely missile”—in the town’s Main Street park.

The Montana Military Museum on the Fort Harrison Complex in Helena covers two centuries of the state’s history in service to the nation. Built and staffed by volunteers, the museum offers a chronological journey in art, artifacts, documents, military equipment, weapons and uniforms. www.montanamilitarymuseum.org

1919
Jan. 10: The Army and Navy Association forms in Butte, soon followed by the Soldiers and Sailors Club of Helena, and nearly two-dozen others. The Butte and Helena groups call for state caucuses of World War veterans.

March 15-17: Walter L. Verge of Choteau is Montana’s lone representative at the Paris Peace Conference when a French court ruled The American Legion is born. Eighteen of Montana’s 22 World War veterans groups agree to place their membership under The American Legion emblem.

June 30–July 1: Malta is the site of the first American Legion Department of Montana Convention. Gov. Sam V. Stewart addresses the veterans.

Sept. 19-20: Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., known as “the father of The American Legion,” travels through Montana, stopping to speak in Helena, Butte and Anaconda to raise awareness about the new veterans group he helped found.

Silver Bowl Post 1 in Butte starts a “Get Out the Vote” program that ultimately is adopted by posts worldwide as a national initiative.

Montana Legionnaires travel to France and parade in chaps and sombreros for the national convention in Paris during World War II. Legionnaires supported a Montana Power Company program to give knives to troops crossing the state by train. Some 1,100 were presented. The blades were cut and shaped by the Anaconda Company’s MFC employees at Black Eagle ground and sharpened the blades, and workers in Great Falls cast the aluminum handles.

1927

1942-43

The Department of Montana has five posts on American Indian reservations and one in Calgary, Alberta.

Sweetgrass American Legion Post 73 is located approximately 10 feet from the Canada border, just inside the United States.

Galata Post 69 is one of five occupied buildings in the town.

EVERY DEPARTMENT HAS A STORY
The American Legion of MONTANA

Montana Legionnaires
The Saco Plunge

The American Legion Health Plunge Resort sprang into existence near Saco in the early 1930s a few years after a wildcat gas driller struck hot water more than 3,000 feet beneath the surface of the earth. For years, water and gas bubbled to the top and mixed; visitors could light the well water on fire. American Legion posts in Saco, Hillsdale and Malta soon worked together to obtain federal funding to separate the gas from the water, and it became a Works Project Administration endeavor supported by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had found therapeutic relief from polio soaking in hot springs elsewhere in the country. WPA workers built stone pools there, and the Saco Plunge became an institution on the High Line.

The Legion operated the resort until 1957 when a hot-water well casing collapsed about 1,000 feet down. Today, after massive renovations and modernization, the former Legion resort is attracting soaked once again, under private ownership as the Sleeping Buffalo Hot Springs, so named for a distinctive rock along Highway 2 that resembles a sleeping buffalo.

Twin Bridges Post 31, which has no post home, led local efforts to build and maintain a community pond and sponsors an annual youth fishing derby with multiple prizes for various age groups. Twin Bridges has been cited as the possible home of Sgt. William Patterson, a wounded World War I soldier who met Theodore Roosevelt Jr. at an Army hospital in France and helped inspire the formation of The American Legion.

See a post profile: www.legion.org/centennial

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A gas explosion leveled the Roseman American Legion post. Members raised the necessary funds to rebuild it.

American Legion Riders lead a caravan of veterans from Helena to West Yellowstone to rededicate the route as the POW/MIA Memorial Highway through Montana.

Helena American Legion Post 2 Commander Josh Clement, Army and Montana Army National Guard veteran, who deployed to Iraq, Bosnia and Kuwait; he graduated from national American Legion College in 2015 and served as commander of Three Montana Posts.

Five Montana American Legion post are named in honor of U.S. military personnel who have made the ultimate sacrifice since 9/11: Jeremy S. Monroe Post 58 in Darby; Andrew Bedard Post 66 in Missoula; Kristoffer Stonecipher Post 124 in Frenchtown; Trevor J. Johnson Post 44 in Colstrip; and Andrew Pearson Post 117 in Billings.

Helena is the birthplace of the modern Special Forces. The U.S.-Canada unit of elite fighters assembled as the 1st Special Service Force was a top-secret, highly trained group of hand-picked warriors who would later become known as “The Devil’s Brigade” or the “Black Devils” who used their mountaineering and rough-country training skills to dislodge German artillery positions in Italy and pave the way for Allied advance into Rome in 1944. Many of the the Force returned to live in Helena and the surrounding area after the war and became prominent members of The American Legion.

Montana’s 163rd Infantry Division distinguished itself in the Pacific Theater of World War II, fighting bloody, tropical battles against well-positioned Japanese forces in New Guinea and the Philippines.

In 2005, the Augusta American Legion Rodeo was named Montana’s Tourism Attraction of the Year. American Legion Post 125 in Drummond launched a $100,000 makeover of its historic rodeo arena, home of an annual 4th of July pro rodeo, in 2014. Chateau Post 6 owners and operators the rodeo arena there and hosts a pro event each summer.

The American Legion really gives me that point where you retire. I want to serve my community, my family, my nation. Now, The American Legion really gives me that opportunity, to serve veterans, to focus on my community, my state and my nation. That’s what I see The American Legion does. We’re still trying to serve, to make our communities better.

The George W. Rulon American Legion Baseball Player of the Year for 2004 was Nolan Gallagher of Red Lodge. He went on to pitch collegiately at Stanford and for three seasons in the Seattle Mariners system.

Mariners system.

For years, water and gas bubbled to the top and mixed; visitors could light the well water on fire. American Legion posts in Saco, Hillsdale and Malta soon worked together to obtain federal funding to separate the gas from the water, and it became a Works Project Administration endeavor supported by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had found therapeutic relief from polio soaking in hot springs elsewhere in the country. WPA workers built stone pools there, and the Saco Plunge became an institution on the High Line.

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