

How Loy Henderson Earned Estonia's Cross of Liberty



Loy W. Henderson (Photo Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Captain Loy Wesley Henderson was one of 35 U.S. Army officers to receive the Cross of Liberty for his military service during Estonia's War of Independence and its immediate aftermath (eight U.S. diplomats also received the same high honor for their efforts). While a number of U.S. Army officers worked as military advisors to Estonia's new army, Capt. Henderson was a member of the American Red Cross (ARC). After the United States joined the Great War in April 1917, the U.S. Government mobilized and militarized the ARC. As a result, the U.S. Secretary of War issued U.S. Army commissions to those ARC members who agreed to work in battle zones. These ARC volunteers were required to wear U.S. Army uniforms that corresponded to their new military ranks.

In Estonia, ARC officers provided ambulance services and ran field hospitals directly behind the front lines during the last part of the War of Independence (1918-1920). ARC officers put their

lives at risk by crossing shifting battle lines or by going straight into the heart of raging epidemics in order to help others. Although they carried no weapons, their jobs were often more dangerous than those of their regular U.S. Army colleagues. The Government of Estonia understood this when it awarded the Order of the Estonian Red Cross to 30 ARC officers who worked to save the lives of others while based in Estonia. Twenty of these men also earned the Cross of Liberty for risking their own lives in the process. Not every ARC officer would live to receive his medals: two of them died in Estonia while performing their duties.

The Path to the American Red Cross Also Leads to Estonia

Loy W. Henderson and his identical twin Roy were born a few minutes apart on June 28, 1892 near Rogers, Arkansas. While playing together at age nine, the younger Loy broke his right arm. As the country doctor did not set the bone correctly, Loy's arm failed to heal properly. When the U.S. entered the Great War, this unfortunate childhood break would end up splitting the two inseparable brothers apart. Although both Henderson twins attempted to enlist in officer training camp, only the older Roy was accepted. After spending a year studying law at the University of Denver, Loy learned about the work the American Red Cross was doing in Europe and decided to volunteer in the summer of 1918. This fateful decision would forever link Loy's life to the Baltic region and lead to a long and successful career with the U.S. Foreign Service. Roy, however, would never make it to Europe – one of his kidneys was damaged during training and had to be removed.

Arriving in France in late November 1918 after the Armistice had been declared, Lieutenant Loy Henderson's first job was to help prepare wounded American soldiers for the trip home. Promoted in March 1919, Capt. Henderson was assigned to Berlin to help with the repatriation of soldiers from the Russian Imperial Army held in German prisoner of war camps. Among those soldiers he and his ARC colleagues helped send home were 1,758 Estonians, 9,970 Lithuanians, and about 1,500 Latvians in addition to 24,753 Russians. While arranging for the return home of the new Baltic nationals, Capt. Henderson traveled to Lithuania for the first time in April 1919 and to Latvia in August and September that same year.

When he saw first hand how much the Baltic states needed help, Capt. Henderson volunteered to join the new “American Red Cross Commission to Western Russia and the Baltic States” in October 1919 rather than return to the United States. Over the next two years, Capt. Henderson would see service in all three new Baltic nations. Along with almost sixty of his ARC colleagues including doctors, nurses, and other support staff, Capt. Henderson and his fellow officers would answer the call of duty in Estonia.

Risking His Life for Estonia

Capt. Henderson traveled to his new assignment in Narva in February 1920 not long after Soviet Russia and Estonia signed the Treaty of Tartu. While Estonia's War of Independence was technically over, the new country was still trying to deal with its aftermath. When General Nikolai Yudenich's White Russian Army retreated into Estonia after their defeat near Petrograd

in November 1919, they brought typhus to their base in Narva. When this growing typhus epidemic threatened to spread all across Estonia, Capt. Henderson and three of his fellow ARC officers – Capt. Wilbur F. Howell, Lt. Clifford A. Blanton, and Lt. George W. Winfield – volunteered to oversee the quarantine around Narva after the Estonian Government put the ARC in charge of all sanitary measures. This was an extremely dangerous job. Before the first vaccine was developed in 1930, the mortality rate for those infected with typhus was between 10% and 60%. Typhus thrived during disasters and is thought to have killed at least three million citizens of the Russian Empire in the wake of the Great War.

As Russian officers and their men refused to take orders from their Estonian counterparts, Capt. Henderson assumed full command of all White Army field hospitals in and around Narva. It was exactly for situations like this that the U.S. Government had made U.S. Army officers out of ARC members. When the Red Army was expelled from Narva in February 1919, they stripped the Krenholm textile factory of all its equipment. When the White Army collapsed at the end of that year, Krenholm's empty shell – along with the castles of Narva and Ivangorod – became their main field hospitals.

Capt. Henderson was appalled by the conditions he found among the defeated and demoralized troops of the White Army. In his memoirs *A Question of Trust* (1986), Capt. Henderson describes his first visit to Krenholm: “Lying on the floor in disorderly rows were several hundred men clothed in remnants of old uniforms, tattered overcoats, or merely piles of rags. Some were lying on, or were wrapped in, dirty pieces of blankets. Through the long hair that covered their heads and faces we could see their eyes, frequently bright with fever, peering at us, some angrily, some pleadingly, some without any emotions at all.”

Capt. Henderson continued: “Portions of the hair and beards of many of the patients were of a bluish gray color and on closer examination I found that these areas so colored were in motion. I felt nauseated when I discovered that the color and motion were due to the closely packed colonies of lice and lice nits. Captain Robinson paused and pointed at the bluish gray column that was moving slowly along the floor toward a patient who was either asleep or unconscious. This column was leaving the beard and hair of a man who I saw was dead. These insects would not remain on a dead person. When a man died, therefore, they usually began their march toward the nearest living person.” Lice, of course, were the vector through which typhus spread from human to human. And so, Capt. Henderson and his men set about their Herculean task of cleaning up not only Krenholm but also the dozens of nearby field hospitals in similar shape.

An ARC report from the time described the system put into place: the ARC, “with the aid of the Estonian Sanitary Corps, began the organization of clean-up squads among the Russian soldiers. It was necessary at the beginning for the American to give actual demonstrations in the cleansing of patients who had been helpless and unattended for weeks. They cut the hair and beards of the men, bathed them, put them in clean clothes and carried them back to the beds which in the meantime had been fumigated and provided with clean linens. Following the American example and under American command, the Russians worked in squads of fifty men each with soap, water and disinfectants, cleaned patients, beds, linen and the buildings of the

temporary hospitals.”

These Russian mobile sanitary squads – made up of soldiers who had survived their own bouts with typhus – deloused 9,000 people, disinfected 80 hospitals, and maintained the sanitary cordon protecting the rest of Estonia from the dreaded disease. Using the American model and supplies provided by the ARC, the Estonian Government eventually put 80 squads (4,000 men) in the field to end the threat of typhus to Estonia once and for all.

Success in the battle against typhus came at a high cost in Russian, Estonian, and even American lives. Having worked for almost a month in close proximity to so many typhus patients and victims, Capt. Henderson and his fellow ARC officers came down with the disease just as they were finishing up their successful mission in Narva. While delirious with fever, Capt. Henderson assumed he was dying and decided he should bid farewell to his twin brother Roy – he even thought he felt his brother's hand on his shoulder in response. Although Capt. Henderson and Capt. Wilbur Howell would eventually recover, Lt. Clifford Blanton and Lt. George Winfield were not so lucky. Lt. Blanton died on March 26, 1920. Not long after talking about how much he loved his wife, Lt. Winfield died on March 28. Lieutenants Blanton and Winfield had sacrificed their lives for Estonia. For their work in Narva, the Estonian Government awarded the Cross of Liberty to all four men – both living and dead. While passing through Tallinn on his way back to Riga, Capt. Henderson was stunned to receive a telegram informing him that his older twin Roy had died of kidney failure on the very same day that he lay near death on a hospital bed in Narva. In his fevered vision, it had been a dying Roy who was saying good-bye to Loy and not the other way around.

One Last Gift

Convinced by his time in the Baltics that he needed to find some other way to continue serving the United States overseas, Loy Henderson joined the U.S. Foreign Service in 1922. During the span of his almost forty year career with the U.S. State Department, Henderson would serve as the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq (1943-1945), India (1948-1951), and Iran (1951-1954). Along the way, Henderson was also assigned as Third and then Second Secretary to the U.S. Legation in Latvia from 1927-1930 (he was also accredited to Estonia and Lithuania at the time). It was in Riga that Henderson met and married a Latvian named Elise Marie Heinrichson and became George F. Kennan's mentor.

While in Moscow from 1934-1938, Henderson would work once again with Kennan as well as with John C. Wiley, who would later become the last pre-war Minister to Estonia and Latvia (1938-1940). As Assistant Chief of the Division of European Affairs (1938-1942), Henderson would perform one final service on behalf of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Using information provided by Wiley directly from Riga and Tallinn, Henderson convinced Under Secretary Sumner Welles to issue his non-recognition statement on July 23, 1940. As a result, the U.S. Government refused to acknowledge the illegal and forcible incorporation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia into the Soviet Union.



Loy and Elise Henderson standing in front of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow in 1935 with the Kremlin in the background.

(Photo from Loy Henderson Collection, Box 4, Hoover Institution Archives)