

For a Virginian, the panorama of the resplendent Blue Ridge Mountains or the vast and placid waters of a calm day on the Chesapeake Bay count as two of the most beautiful sights God created. But on a sunny winter day in January 1989, this US Army major first beheld the endless plains of Kansas, another masterpiece of His hands. Their expanse seemed to go on forever, inviting my eye to survey the enormous blue sky above and ahead. Even when the horizon was broken by the Flint Hills east of Fort Riley, home of the 1st Infantry Division (1ID) situated between the towns of Manhattan and Junction City, you could not avoid marveling at the vastness of “The Sunflower State.” It was simply big. I suppose it was fitting that the division I was joining as a field artillery (FA) officer was known as “The Big Red One” (BRO).

As we drove west on Interstate 70 (I-70), I struggled to pay attention to the road, even while responding to determined and periodic “When will we get there?” queries from the back of our minivan. My wife, Shelley, and our three kids, Amy, John, and Paul, were headed for a new home and an assignment that would change my life and theirs forever.

The 1ID is a storied outfit, and now I would be part of it. It was constituted in the Regular Army on May 24, 1917, beginning as the First Expeditionary Division, composed of Army units on the Mexican border and various Army posts throughout the US. Officially organized on June 8 of that year and further redesignated as Headquarters, 1st Division, it shortly embarked on its new mission to Europe, and the war that awaited. Its history and record in World War I, World War II, the Cold War, and Vietnam were the stuff of Medals of Honor, heroic actions in battle, and even Hollywood movies.