Washington’s logging industry played a key role in the nation’s war effort during the First World War, a Highline professor told last week’s history seminar.

Each week, a member of the faculty or an occasional guest speaker is invited to do a presentation on a piece of history that is a part of their expertise. Located in Building 3, room 102, these weekly seminars can also make participants eligible for a single history credit if they show up for every lecture of the semester.

Robert Nylander, a professor in the paralegal department at Highline College and a retired attorney who worked as an attorney for 30 years said that when the United States entered into World War I in 1917, Washington state found that it already had one of the important keys to winning the war against the Central Powers (Germany, Austria/Hungary, Bulgaria and The Ottoman Empire).

During this time, the most important thing that was needed to build a plane was Sitka spruce, a large, strong tree that was perfect for the creation of planes. The Olympic Peninsula had an abundance of the Sitka spruce so The United States made a deal with the other allied nations that the country would provide a lot of the materials needed to build the planes.

Col Brice P. Disque was selected to head the spruce production division in Vancouver, Wash. and he started by securing rights for the workers, many of whom were drafted for the war. The people working in the forest would only work for eight hours and would be treated to better living conditions. Though that might be expected with many jobs today, this was a strange and outlandish concept at the time.

“The army tried to pick people who had experience as loggers,” Nylander said.

“Some of the people they send here have been doing logging in the east where the trees are [relatively small] and the techniques are completely different, and some of them frankly didn’t know anything about logging and lumbering at all. They took volunteers at the low end and the high end of the draft age who had logging experience in addition to the draftees that they called out of the draft pool.”

Nylander’s strong connection to this story is that his Great Uncle Henry was one of the industrialists that who was brought in by the government to build one of the rail lines that linked the logging areas to the sawmills.

Over the course of a year, the spruce production division had more than 25,000 workers and in their prime, they were able to produce 22.5 million board feet in October of 1918. In all, the workers in this area managed to produce 150 million board feet of lumber. To put that into perspective, that’s enough wood to go around the world. This also meant that the allies had a 6 to 1 superiority over Germany in terms of Sitka spruce.

“They did some amazing things, they built the largest sawmill in Vancouver, Wash. in 45 days; soldiers built this,” Nylander said.

World War I officially ended on Nov. 11, 1918 and the spruce production division was shut down immediately after. Though one might have expected praise for Disque’s efforts, he received extreme criticism after the war ended.

“People who do good things very often are not rewarded and he was the subject of a very strenuous congressional investigation that accused the spruce production division, Bryce Disque himself and a lot of his colleagues like my Uncle Henry of absolute terrible corruption and so forth and on,” Nylander said.

Nonetheless, the spruce production division had a clear impact on the war and eventually the treatment of workers in this camp would become the norm for all other logging companies in the Pacific Northwest.

“The spruce production division was successful because it stabilized labor and it allowed Washington to produce scads of spruce that made all kinds of airplanes able to fly. It probably helped to shorten World War I,” Nylander said.