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## EDMUNDS ESSAYS

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### VERMONT IN THE CIVIL WAR

By BARTLEY COSTELLO III

Teacher

SISTER MARY CLEMENTINE

THE roar of the cannon which echoed from Charlestown Harbor throughout the land on April 12, 1861, woke the soundest sleeper from his quiet dreams. The news of the surrender of Fort Sumter and President Lincoln's first call for 75,000 troops reached the State of Vermont on April 14. The news of the surrender was received with an intense feeling of disdain, while the news of Lincoln's call was received with inexpressible satisfaction and patriotic spirit.

On June 25, 1862, Honorable Edwin M. Stanton, the Secretary of War, sent out a call to arms to the Governor of Vermont for troops. Governor Frederick Holbrook, brother of Colonel Holbrook of Civil War fame, replied that he could have the Ninth and Tenth Regiments ready in fifty days. At this point, it should be interesting to note that the Vermont troops were the first in the Union to answer the call.

Even though the State was far less ready to answer this call to arms in 1861 than it was in 1775 because of the lack of a trained militia, the people surged up with a great feeling of patriotic pride and devotion, and for the next four years all the people of this State persevered and labored in order that that Union, which had been ordained by free men should not perish or crumble in the face of efforts to divide the Union.

The books of the United States Provost Marshall General show that this thinly populated state gave one-tenth of her manhood to the struggle between the North and South. In addition, many units from other states had a great number of emigrated Vermonters.

Vermont's first appropriation for war purposes was one million dollars. Throughout the coming conflict, her total outlay would be nine million dollars. Because of our generous contribution, the Vermont troops cost the Federal Government less money than any other troops. Another reason for this was the Vermont troops contained many non-commissioned soldiers and but a few commissioned officers.

This unusual indifference to the rank did not mean that the services we rendered were inferior or that our men gave their second best. In nine of the twelve major campaigns of the war, the troops from Vermont were either actively engaged or played an outstanding part.

The first troops to enter the conflict from Vermont were the Ninth, Tenth and Eleventh Regiments. These were sent into rebel territory and were among the first troops to assault rebel entrenchments. These Vermont troops gained the distinction of being the first to cross onto Confederate land and make an attack on rebel fortresses. This invasion into Virginia was called by the *New York Tribune* the first permanent occupation of the sacred soil of Virginia (May 27). William Young Warren Ripley, from Center Rutland, Vermont, took command of these early Vermont troops. While the term of service was only three months for these soldiers, they saw sufficient action to provide them with invaluable experience and equipped them with the tools which came in handy later as some of the men re-enlisted in different regiments.

A second call to arms reached Vermont meanwhile, and men from all over the state were sent to Brattleboro where they were organized into different fighting units. The answer to this second call was tremendous and was received in much the same way as the first one. From the wealthiest man to the poorest man in the Green Mountain State, a spirit of cooperation was demonstrated along with a smooth blending of individual qualities to produce a magnificent brigade which was to prove so necessary a factor in the winning of the war.

On June 8, 1861, the poorly planned, disastrous first major battle of the war at Big Bethel took place. The result of the lack of good judgment in this battle proved fatal, as blunders were made by both the experienced leaders and the raw recruits. This battle provided a great lift in the way of encouragement for the Confederate troops and commanders. It can be said that no Vermonter had anything to do with the ignorance or folly that went into the planning of the battle. In fact, the First Regiment combined with a battalion from Massachusetts, and under the command of Colonel P. T. Washburn, of Woodstock, Vermont, were the only Union Troops to cross the creek that divided the two armies. Against superior Rebel forces, they dented their defenses and did substantial damage to the enemy. The Vermonters were forced back only after a long struggle and three troops from the Green Mountain State, had given the Rebels a preview of what to expect from the cool-headed and aggressive Green Mountain Boys in the future.

It was at this time that the Second Regiment was being organized in

Brattleboro. This regiment was to prove itself one of the finest ever sent out of the State of Vermont. It served with notable distinction as it took part in almost all the major battles from Bull Run to Lee's surrender at Appomatox. This regiment was extremely fortunate in having an excellent staff of officers, headed by Colonel Israel B. Richardson from Burlington.

The Second travelled to Washington and from there advanced toward the front lines of the Union Army. Marching to Bull Run, the men began to develop the spirit which would prove valuable both to themselves and to the Union. Their spirit held up the Army of the Potomac at this crucial time when confidence was ebbing very low after the crushing defeat at Big Bethel. This army, which had thought itself invincible, was finding out how uncertain war could be under the capable teachers who were inflicting painful lessons, the Confederates. The Battle of Bull Run proved ironic due to the fact that soldiers of the Union Army thought that they had won before they ever started to fight. With this complacent attitude, the Union at first seemed to be gaining an advantage when the Confederate forces rose up under the tremendous driving force of General J. E. B. Stuart. The Second Regiment was not put into action until the day was already lost. It held back the enemy pursuit as the rest of the Union forces fell back across Bull Run in retreat under the cover of darkness. Then the Second, unconscious of defeat, reluctantly followed our retreating columns, before the rebels, our charging foe. Even though it was a dark day for the Union, the Vermont troops had served with valor, and helped to save something out of the chaos.

Captain William Young Warren Ripley, meanwhile, had led his troops against the Confederate forces at Newport News and despite the magnitude of the Union loss, Ripley's conspicuous ability as a soldier brought him into notice rapidly.

His Regiment (the Eleventh) joined with the Army of the Potomac and entered into the Peninsular Campaign. The people of the United States looked hopefully toward this campaign and believed that it would result in an overthrow of the Rebellion. The campaign, however, was to turn out directly to the contrary. It resulted in disastrous failure. The only movement below Yorktown was by a battalion of Vermont troops which assaulted the enemy's works at Lee's Hills, but the large Confederate garrison finally threw them back. Had the commanding officer of the Army of the Potomac, General McClellan, rushed to the aid of the Vermont troops, the whole history of the campaign might have been changed. It was in this particular assault that the Vermonters proved themselves with their valiant efforts and magnifi-

cent courage. Also concerning this assault, I noted this quote of Colonel W. G. Veazey, "Regret that the movement was not pushed is enhanced by General Smith's reflection that among the four companies of the Third Vermont, who first crossed Warwick Creek, there were more acts of individual heroism performed than he ever before read of in a great battle." So instead of a complete victory, the Union troops were completely routed and were forced to make a seven days retreat.

At Malvern Hill, we again meet Ripley as he leads his sharpshooters in resistance to the rebel army. It was at this place that the Lieutenant Colonel was forced to vacate his command because of wounds. This move left the Green Mountain troops without one of the greatest commanders that Vermont has ever known.

After a short period of time, his condition improved so greatly that he was given a chance to command the Third Regiment, which was being formed in Brattleboro. After training them, he advanced with them to join the Army of the Potomac. The winter of 1862-1863 was spent guarding a five mile line of the Potomac River.

On April 19, 1863, the brigade marched to the village of Poolville, set up quarters and stayed here until June. On June 22, the Third received orders to proceed to Harper's Ferry. It was at this time that Major General George G. Meade assumed command of the Army of the Potomac. Harper's Ferry was highly fortified with forts and several batteries of large guns, but after eight days of fighting, on June 30, the stronghold was captured by the Union soldiers and the Rebel forces were forced to give ground for about the first time in the War. This battle was to prove prophetic since the Union was to be a victor in the Battle of Gettysburg a few days later.

Another bright spot in this inglorious campaign was the storming of Fredricksburg on May 3. The Second Regiment of Vermont was one of the first regiments to gain the crest of Marye's famous heights, driving the enemy from the works.

Meanwhile, in the west, at the Mississippi outpost of Vicksburg, the Union forces made an almost impossible assault and drove the Confederates out of their positions and back to their main fortifications. Two weeks later, a second assault was made and the Eighth made a gallant, though hopeless attack on the Confederate forces. This attack was so furious that in the short space of five minutes, eighty men fell and the Eighth was depleted by one-third of its numbers. Despite this, the regiment pushed forward where others had failed, and held a seemingly impossible position for a day. In doing this, the Vermonters gained a reputation for bravery which it never lost.

By the end of June, 1863, a massive force of both Confederate and

Union troops had assembled near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. It was here that the Vermonters were to prove themselves as the type of men who were called the "Green Mountain Boys of 1776". It was at Gettysburg that Vermonters really saved the day, in fact, they saved the whole country by their valiant actions. This battle, which commenced on July 1 and ended with the defeat of the rebel forces on July 3, is considered one of the greatest and most important ever to take place in North America.

The heroic part played in this battle by the Second Vermont Brigade is well described by these words uttered by General John Sedgewick on July first which show the tremendous confidence that the commanders had for the Vermont troops. These were, "Put the Vermonters ahead, and keep the column well closed up." These words aptly describe the valor and courage that our troops must have possessed and they still quicker a feeling of pride in the hearts of all loyal Vermonters.

At one decisive moment of this battle that hung trembling in the balance for three days, the Vermonters under General Stannard made a magnificent charge, driving the Rebel forces abruptly back. This charge has been called by historians as "the decisive movement of the decisive day, the turning point of the battle, the turning point of the war".

After the battle, the troops of the Green Mountain State, took the place of the troops that had broken, drove back the remaining Confederate forces, filled a large gap in the lines, and reestablished the northern lines along Cemetery Ridge. This day, July 3, will reign long in the hearts of all Americans as the day that Vermonters saved the United States in a battle that, if lost, would have led to her inevitable destruction. From Gettysburg, the tide of the war slowly fell toward the North.

The command of the Army of the Potomac next came into the eager hands of Ulysses S. Grant. His first noteworthy battle was the Battle of the Wilderness. Among the Vermont troops that took part in this battle, perhaps the most noticeable efforts were made by The First Vermont Brigade. These gallant soldiers made a charge which scooped in three miles of Confederate wagons, recapturing Union guns and seizing Rebel arms. The Vermont troops were called by General Grant the "stadiest of the steady, brave as the bravest, and having no superiors as fighters among any troops of any country".

In the meantime, on August 1, the First Regiment of Vermont went with its brigade to New York to maintain order during the draft, and

taking advantage of the nearness to home, some of the men sent for their families and had many pleasant family reunions in the "Big City".

After this, the troops were ordered to advance to the Shenandoah Valley and prepare for an assault on Petersburg. On April 2, 1864, the Second distinguished themselves once again with a victorious march on the sturdy defenses of Petersburg and sent the Rebels fleeing from the city. The Army of the Potomac pursued the mass of Confederate troops who were making a quick retreat.

By August 6, our troops had reached the middle of Virginia. Even though the ranks were terrifically depleted at Gettysburg, and in recent minor skirmishes, the men from Vermont crossed the Rappahannock River and engaging Jeb Stuart's forces made a splendid effort, preventing Stuart's troops making any advances toward the rest of the Union forces.

Defeat now seemed inevitable for the Rebels and with the fall of Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy, an onslaught of the Confederate forces began. The Second Regiment from Vermont joined in the pursuit of Lee's Army, which was retreating in the face of terrible losses. Following this, most of the Vermont troops left for home and closed another glorious chapter of the gallant ventures of Vermonters in the Civil War.

The Vermonters were known for a number of qualities, among the most famous of which was the spirit of self confidence, believing that they could not be beaten by all the armies of the rebellion combined.

As far back as the battle at Lee's Mills, the Vermonters had shown that they possessed the needed skills to become great fighters. It was here that they crossed a narrow dam under fire, made an attack, and waded back across the stream with a steadiness that completely surprised the enemy.

The Vermont troops were a free-spirited and independent group of soldiers, thriving on marching and fighting, and doing these things in a manner that was their own, completely different from the manner taught at West Point. These simple minded patriots from the Green Mountain adopted a rule of their own to meet various occasions that arose.

One of the finer achievements our troops attained that is little known is that Vermont troops, in four years of service, did not surrender a single flag to the enemy.

Our Brigade has been called the "best brigade in the Army of the Potomac". Weak and worthless men were discharged from the ranks

frequently because the commander knew that their ranks would be filled up quickly since there was a continual flow of new blood from the State. As a result, the Vermont ranks were almost always full and these troops earned a reputation of which all here in Vermont can be proud.

We should always cherish the memories of the five thousand men from Vermont who made a sacrifice for the sins of a nation, the price that all nations must pay in order to preserve liberty.

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