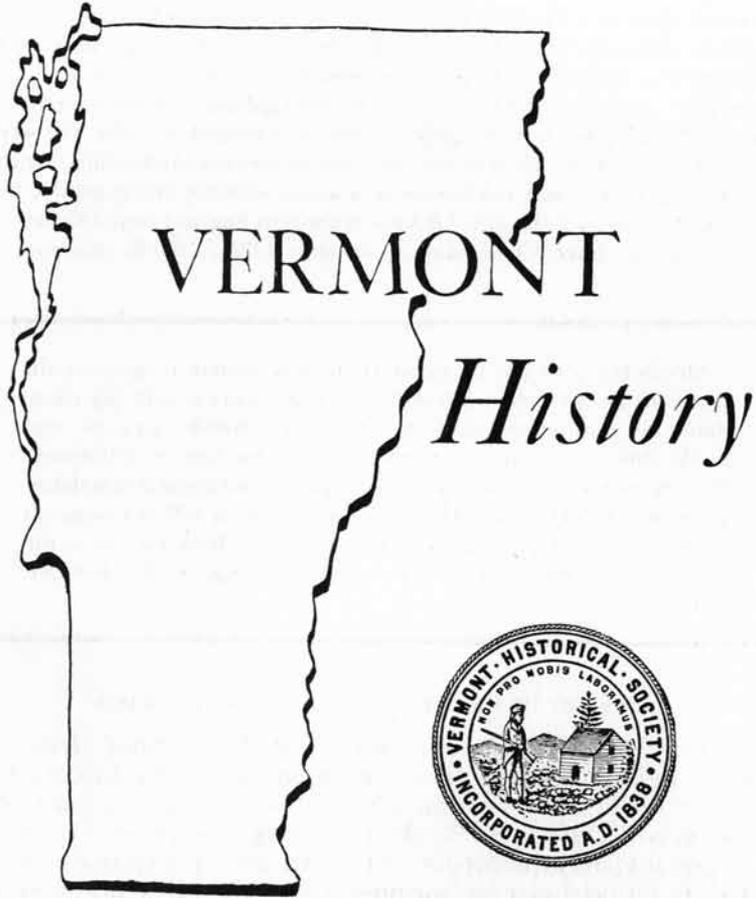
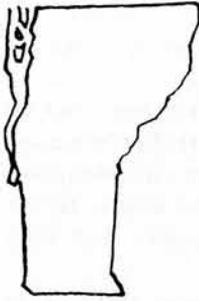


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Despite the lack of military discipline, these Vermonters became one of the truly effective cavalry regiments to fight in the Civil War.

The Inner Life of The First Vermont Volunteer Cavalry, 1861-1865

By STEPHEN Z. STARR

The State of Vermont, with a total male population of 158,415 in 1860 — males of all ages, from infants to patriarchs — contributed nearly 33,000 men to the Union armies between 1861 and the end of the Civil War in 1865.¹ From first to last, seventeen regiments of infantry, three batteries of light artillery, one regiment of cavalry, and three companies of sharpshooters went off from Vermont to subdue rebellion.²

Vermont had already raised three regiments of infantry and was in the process of raising two more, when Lemuel B. Platt of Colchester, “a well-to-do farmer 50 years old, of tall and powerful frame, of marked energy, and of considerable prominence in local politics,” proposed to Governor Erastus Fairbanks that he be given authority to recruit a regiment of cavalry.³ With no state law to authorize recruiting of mounted troops, the Governor declined the offer and suggested that Platt make his proposal directly to the War Department.

At the outbreak of the war, the 17,000-man regular army included five regiments of cavalry, scattered in small detachments mostly among the frontier posts and forts, from Mexico on the south to Canada on the north and from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Coast. Following the bombardment of Fort Sumter and President Lincoln’s call for 75,000 troops to put down the rebellion, regiments of cavalry were offered to the government, but they were uniformly declined.⁴ General-in-Chief Winfield Scott believed, or professed to believe, that the existing five regiments of regular cavalry (to which a sixth was added in the summer of 1861) were all the mounted troops that would be needed. Moreover, he said the war would be over before volunteers could be sufficiently

trained to be effective cavalry, and besides, cavalry was expensive — it cost nearly \$600,000, twice the cost of a regiment of infantry to equip a cavalry regiment for the field.

The rout of the federal army at Bull Run and the President's call for additional troops brought about a drastic change. Thereafter, mounted troops, for which the government had neither horses, nor weapons, uniforms or equipment, were welcomed into the federal service. By the end of 1861, eighty-two regiments of volunteer cavalry had been mustered in and more were under way.

Platt followed Governor Fairbanks' suggestion and traveled to Washington where he took the precaution of enlisting the support of Vermont Senator Solomon Foot, who accompanied him on a visit to Secretary of War Simon Cameron. Platt explained his plan to raise the regiment and get it mounted on good Vermont horses. He expected to accomplish the task in forty days, but because of his age and lack of military experience (which, he told the Secretary, consisted of "three days spent at a militia muster when he was a young man, two of which he passed in the guard-house"), he did not consider himself qualified to train the regiment or to command it in the field.⁵ Impressed with Platt's candor and good sense, Cameron forthwith issued him a colonel's commission and authorized him to raise a cavalry regiment for the federal service.

Within forty-two days — two days over Platt's schedule — the First Vermont Cavalry, made up entirely of volunteers, nearly all of whom were native Vermonters, was assembled at Camp Ethan Allen in Burlington. The regiment consisted of 966 officers and men when it was mustered into the United States service on November 19, 1861. Each of eight companies was made up of men from a single county — thus Co. A was the Chittenden County company, Co. B came from Franklin County, etc.; Co. D, however, was made up of men from Orange and Caledonia Counties and Co. K, of men from Orleans and Lamoille.⁶ The line officers — captains and first and second lieutenants — were elected by the men of their respective companies. The Governor commissioned field-grade and staff officers on Colonel Platt's recommendation. With two exceptions, none of the thirty-nine officers, from Colonel Platt down to the ten second lieutenants, had any military experience, much less in the cavalry. The senior major, William D. Collins of Bennington, had served as an artillery sergeant in the British army. "This experience, magnified by common report into command of a light battery in her majesty's service, together with his showy appearance on horseback, gave him great distinction, and he was for a time the recognized military authority in the regiment."⁷ The second exception,



COLONEL LEMUEL B. PLATT

the adjutant, Edgar Pitkin of Burlington, had but ninety days of service in the First Vermont Infantry.

On December 14, 1861, when the regiment departed for Washington armed with nothing more than sabers, neither the military education nor the horsemanship of the raw recruits had advanced very far in two months of drill at Camp Ethan Allen. As to discipline, or more accurately the lack of it, the First Vermont Cavalry fared no better or worse than the great majority of the hundreds of other volunteer regiments, horse and foot, in the Union army. The officers shared their men's ignorance of all things military. Bred in the same egalitarian tradition as the kinfolk, schoolmates, friends and neighbors who elected them, officers had neither the habit of command, nor, with rare exceptions, the willingness to risk the unpopularity that went with the exercise of authority. Only slowly, and never more than imperfectly, did these volunteers — officers and men alike — learn that a soldier must obey another man's orders. The little authority the officers possessed or were willing to assert was less important than the judgments and edicts of the "company caucuses," and (in the words of Assistant Surgeon P.M.O. Edson of Chester) "the regimental town meeting that seemed to be always in session."⁸

Having raised the regiment and conducted it to Washington, Colonel Platt, true to his word, resigned. On February 22, 1862, an "outsider," Jonas P. Holliday of the Second United States Cavalry, a West Pointer of the Class of 1850, took over command. The regiment spent the winter in camp near Annapolis, where, under the tutelage of Brigadier-General John P. Hatch, the troopers acquired "their first ideas of discipline, and . . . began to learn to take care of themselves and their horses."⁹ Here too the armament of the regiment was brought up to the totally inadequate standard of the first year of the war by the issuance of Sharps' carbines to ten men in each company, and of Savage "self-cocking" revolvers, "which proved more dangerous to the men than to the enemy" to the rest.¹⁰

Colonel Holliday had been in command a mere two weeks during which time he "gave careful attention to discipline and drill, did dress parade with full ceremony, and spared no pains to make soldiers of his men," when the regiment received orders to leave winter quarters and join the forces guarding the line of the Potomac above Washington.¹¹ From March 9, 1862, when it left Annapolis, until April 9, 1865, when, as part of George Custer's division, Cavalry Corps of the Army of the Potomac, it prepared to charge the Confederates at Appomattox Court House, only to be halted by word that General Robert E. Lee had surrendered, the First Vermont Cavalry saw as much service as any regi-

ment in the Union armies. In 1862 and 1863 they served with General Nathaniel Banks in Stonewall Jackson's spectacular Valley Campaign; with General John Pope in the campaign that ended with the humiliating defeat of Second Bull Run; in the outer defenses of Washington, trying, with a minimum of success, to cope with John Mosby, the ablest of Confederate guerillas; in Judson Kilpatrick's division in the Gettysburg campaign; in George Meade's campaign in Virginia following Gettysburg; and in the second all-cavalry battle at Brandy Station, followed by another cavalry battle at Buckland Mills. After a relatively peaceful winter in camp, the regiment was in the Kilpatrick-Dahlgren raid to Richmond in March, 1864. Then came the year of glory, from April, 1864, to April, 1865, when the federal cavalry, including the First Vermont, came into its own. Rearmed with the seven-shot, breech-loading Spencer carbine, the best firearm of the war, given superb leadership in the person of bullet-headed, ruthlessly aggressive Philip Sheridan, the 12,000-man Cavalry Corps became the cutting edge of the Army of the Potomac. By its victories at Dinwiddie Court House and Five Forks — in both of which the First Vermont participated — the federal cavalry forced General Lee out of the Richmond-Petersburg defenses and hounded the proud Army of Northern Virginia to its death at Appomattox Court House.

From its first fight at Mount Jackson in the Shenandoah Valley on April 16, 1862, to its last at Appomattox three years later, all or parts of the First Vermont participated in seventy-five skirmishes and battles. From the beginning to the end of its existence, 2,297 officers and men served in the regiment, for Vermont, unlike most Northern States, had the wisdom to add recruits to existing regiments to keep them up to strength, instead of raising new regiments while attrition withered away old, experienced units to mere skeletons.¹² Of these 2,297 officers and men, 102 fell in battle or died of wounds, 112 died of disease, 172 died amidst the horrors of Andersonville and other Confederate prison camps, and eleven died of accidental causes. Another 371 officers and men received honorable discharges, nearly all of them for disability caused by disease or wounds; 156 deserted or were otherwise unaccounted for; 24 officers resigned, as permitted by contemporary War Department rules; and two officers and five enlisted men received dishonorable discharges.¹³ Notwithstanding these losses, which together with detachments for a great variety of purposes, furloughs, etc., at times reduced the numbers of the regiment to 400-500, rank and file, the First Vermont was at full strength when it was mustered out on June 21 and August 9, 1865.

G.G. Benedict in his *Vermont in the Civil War*, has competently chronicled the fighting record of the First Vermont Cavalry.¹⁴ He recounted the "public" events in the life of the regiment, its marches, its encounters with the enemy, its varying fortunes as a combat unit. But Benedict's account ignores the story of the regiment as a living, corporate organism. He recorded those events in the four-year career of the regiment that its veterans would have wished to preserve for posterity. Neither he nor they could have known that a time would come when the details of the campaigns and marches, a record which was to be embalmed for the military historian in the 128 ponderous volumes of the *Official Records*, would be of lesser interest to a generation that has lived through two world wars, than information about the life of the men between the battles. Such details Benedict and his contemporaries would have considered beneath the "dignity of history."

The accomplishments of the regiment in its engagements with the enemy were the subject that the veterans of the regiment wanted to read about and what they wanted their contemporaries and descendants to know. They were proud of their efforts to restore the Union and end slavery. The historian of another cavalry regiment spoke for all the veterans of the Civil War when he wrote, "You will say, 'I, too, was there,' and 'mid the glow of such memories, you will not care that you are old As we call to memory the things that happened in those days our pulses quicken and the old fire lights up our eyes, as again we hear the bugle sounding the charge, and see the sabers flash in the sunlight."¹⁵

But beyond the pleasures of recollection, there was something more that made the hundreds of such books as Benedict's a highly popular form of post-war literature. The "Civil War . . . was not followed by a period of disillusionment; there was no one to assure the veteran that he had fought in vain. Hence he had the sense of having participated in a noble endeavor and felt an unashamed pride in having shared in the accomplishment of a great and most worthy purpose."¹⁶ This consciousness, and the corporate spirit engendered by four years of a shared experience, which for most remained the high point of their lives, led to the publication of approximately 800 regimental histories.¹⁷ Written by men who had themselves served in the regiment whose history they describe, and based for the most part on the wartime diaries and letters and the post-war recollections of fellow-soldiers, these regimental histories are a treasure-house of information missing from chronicles like Benedict's. They contain

everything the men saw and heard and did and experienced, from the formation of their regiment to its muster-out. All their many trials, all



Vermont veterans of the Union Army took continuing and deep pride in their military exploits. The Vermont Cavalry Regimental Association presented a bronze bas relief (three and one-half feet by two and one-half feet) and dedicated it at Gettysbury on July 3, 1913. It depicts the furious charge of the Second Battalion of the First Vermont Cavalry commanded by General William Wells against Law's Brigade at five o'clock in the bloody afternoon of July 3, 1863, the third day of the crucial battle. Each figure represents a leading member of the Second Battalion.

their joys and pleasures, their opinions on every subject under the sun, their reactions to all the varied incidents of their period of service are minutely recorded. What the men thought of their officers and the officers of their men; what they thought of other regiments, other branches of the service, and the enemy; their political attitudes; how they viewed Southerners white and black and the "peculiar institution;" in short, anything and everything that can befall two million men over a span of three or four years, from the most significant to the most trivial, is to be found in regimental histories.¹⁸

Unfortunately, the First Vermont Cavalry did not publish a regimental history. Though its history would to a certain extent duplicate that of other mounted regiments that served in Virginia, it is a great pity that the history was never written to add flesh and blood and the breath and color of life to Benedict's sparse chronicle. The First Vermont Cavalry was just that, the First *Vermont* Cavalry, with its own distinctive corporate character and with its own body of troopers who were not mere statistical units but distinct individuals.

In the absence of a regimental history there is another hitherto unused body of contemporary evidence that sheds light on certain aspects of the history of the First Vermont Cavalry. The army regulations in force during the Civil War required every regiment and every company

within a regiment to keep an "Order and Letter Book," which contained (in addition to such basic data as the names, vital statistics and service records of the men making up the unit, the state of each man's clothing allowance, and the equipment and weapons charged to him) transcripts of all orders issued by the regimental commander, of all brigade, division, army and War Department orders applicable to the regiment, of all reports and letters sent, and a great deal of miscellaneous information about the internal affairs of the regiment or company.¹⁹ These official records, collected by the War Department after the war and now housed in the National Archives in Washington, do not contain the anecdotes and other trivia that are the staple of regimental histories.²⁰ They do, however, contain certain types of information generally omitted by regimental historians, who wrote for and about comrades and friends who, in the postwar years, had reached or were reaching the status of respectable fathers of families and pillars of the community. In their salad days in the army, many of them behaved as soldiers always do. The Civil War, for all its moral fervor, was not the Quest for the Holy Grail. A recital of their misdeeds in the regimental history would not have made edifying reading for wives, children and fellow-vestrymen. Most regimental historians took the safe way out and followed the precept of the historian of the First Maine Cavalry, who declared that "One of the negative determinations was that no unpleasant thing should appear relating to the personal record of any comrade."²¹ The regimental and company order and letter books do not suffer from such restraints and faithfully record the sins of omission and commission of all comrades, individually and collectively.

Discipline and the innumerable forms that a lack of it took occupy a large amount of space in these records. In November, 1862, Major Collins, temporarily in command of the regiment, thought it well to call attention to

the general and increasing negligence . . . of an important point in "military etiquette," namely the saluting of officers. Military salutes is [sic] universally acknowledged as a mark of soldierly instruction and no soldier . . . can neglect it without either insulting the officer or confessing to an inexcusable ignorance on his part.²²

Two months later, Colonel E.B. Sawyer also decided that the regiment needed to be reminded of some of the rules of military good manners. "Soldiers will not," he announced,

visit officers' tents except in cases of necessity, and when a soldier visits an officer's tent . . . he will rap at the tent entrance, and not enter until bidden to come in and when he enters . . . he will uncover, salute, and remain standing until his business is accomplished, unless ordered to sit, and when his business is done, he will immediately retire The

attention of officers is called to the gross impropriety of allowing themselves to be addressed by soldiers by . . . their christian names, or of so addressing their men, or of calling them boys. Every officer should be addressed by his proper military title, and men by their surname, as Jones or Smith, without the prefix of "Mister."²³

And to make sure that the lesson was well understood by all concerned, Colonel Sawyer ordered it read to each company at retreat on three consecutive days.

These, however, were relatively trifling matters, and the troopers commonly ignored such orders as "red tape foolishness" or with epithets considerably less printable. But orders were also issued on more serious disciplinary problems. The men's inveterate habit of wearing a mixture of the uniform and civilian clothing and their liking for wide-brimmed felt or straw hats in preference to the regulation forage cap especially annoyed the commanders.²⁴ Repeated orders tried to keep the men up to the mark in the matter of grooming, cleanliness, and the most elementary rules of sanitation. Officers were ordered to see to it that the men cut their hair and were told that "a want of cleanliness . . . [had] become so general as to demand immediate correction." However, on the recommendation of the brigade surgeon, they were not to be allowed to bathe between the hours of 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. — this in mid-July, in the Shenandoah Valley — presumably to save them from sunstroke.²⁵ Orders were issued time after time to require the camp to be policed, and that dead horses, and the offal resulting from the butchering of beef cattle near the camp, be buried. It was even necessary to direct the men to draw their drinking water from running streams instead of the nearest and doubtless polluted wells.²⁶

Regimental surgeons were directed to inspect daily the log huts the men built to house themselves in winter camp, and to report to the regimental commander on the "degree of cleanliness, order and general condition" of the huts. Regimental commanders were urged to offer appropriate rewards to "excite a wholesome rivalry among the companies" in the matter of cleanliness and good order.²⁷ Company commanders were ordered to "see that the arms and equipments of . . . [their] men . . . are at once thoroughly cleaned."²⁸ Orders prohibiting regimental sutlers from selling "any wines, or liquors or beer of any kind whatsoever," or even cider, to the men joined the other futile efforts to eradicate the all-too-common vice of drunkenness.²⁹

Probably the most prevalent of military sins was the universal urge to leave camp with or without permission, to go wandering about the countryside, and the counterpart of this habit, straggling on the march. These were sins to which cavalymen were particularly prone because of the mobility provided by their horses. In all too many cases — and not

alone in enemy territory — the wandering and straggling were coupled not only with at least partially excusable raids on the orchards, henroosts, pigpens and smokehouses of all farms within reach, but also with out-and-out robbery committed against defenseless civilians. Less than a week after the First Vermont Cavalry had arrived at Annapolis and been brigaded with the Fifth New York Cavalry, General John Hatch found it necessary to announce that "Private property in the vicinity of this camp is placed under the guard of honor of the brigade. All members of the brigade, officers or enlisted men, are called upon to assist in preventing depredations, and reporting and bringing to punishment all who are guilty of such depredations."³⁰

The presence in the regimental order book of a long series of exhortations and prohibitions on the subject of "depredations" indicates the intractability of the problem. It did no good to threaten that "Any officer or soldier who shall be found to have entered the house or molested the property of any citizen without proper authority will be severely punished. Any officer or soldier absent from the limits of camp found in any house whatever . . . will be considered a pillager and treated accordingly."³¹ Equally ineffective were such admonitions as the following, from the labored pen of Colonel Sawyer:

The colonel commanding does not presume the officers of this command ignorant of the many severe, and he would add, salutary rules, orders and regulations upon the subject, but believes their apparent indifference and neglect to obey them, in some degree at least the result of circumstances beyond their control; but the evils arising from this neglect are becoming . . . of such importance as to demand the prompt and earnest and hearty cooperation of every officer of this command who wishes to read the history of this war with pleasure and to look back upon his administration under the proud title of American officer, without a blush in supressing straggling and pillaging and marauding.³²

Colonel Sawyer's appeal provides an excellent introduction to another theme that runs through the long series of circulars and orders dealing with the administrative problems of the regiment. Officers were at least as lax in the performance of their duties as their men, and effects of their misconduct clearly proved more damaging to good order, efficiency and discipline, than that of the enlisted men. Commanding officers had to contend with an inextricable tangle of officers unwilling to control their men and of enlisted men resisting any effort to restrict their freedom.

The unauthorized absence of officers from their posts presented a constant problem. The stark question posed by Adjutant Edgar Pitkin to Captain George B. Conger of St. Albans on June 26, 1862, "Sir, I am directed by Colonel Tomkins to require of you a reply to the following

CAPTAIN
GEORGE CONGER
*of St. Albans who com-
manded Company B,
First Vermont Cavalry.*



interrogatory: By what authority are you absent from the regiment?" illustrates a situation that was not uncommon.³³ Lieutenant-Colonel George B. Kellogg of Brattleboro was dismissed from the service for absence without leave from the regiment. So prevalent was this problem that in October, 1862, all the regiments of the cavalry division of which the First Vermont was then a part were ordered to report "the names and rank of all officers . . . absent without leave," and "the length of time they have been absent."³⁴ Nor was the unauthorized absence of officers confined to the early part of the war. In January, 1864, only eight of the thirty-six line officers of the First Vermont were at their posts. Some of the absences were legitimate, but some were not.³⁵

Even when at their posts the officers needed constant reminders of their duties to keep them up to the mark. Orders reflect on the competence and devotion to duty of the line officers as orders to police the camp, for example, would not have been needed had the officers been doing their duty. Even more direct evidence of negligence and in-

competence exists in the form of repeated orders requiring company officers to be present at roll calls, to attend stable calls and see to it that the horses were properly groomed, and to conduct company drills.³⁶ Colonel Charles H. Tomkins, after having had a few days in which to look over the regiment after taking command on May 23, 1862, issued the following order:

The attention of officers of this regiment is called to the loose and very unmilitary manner of performing duty in the regiment, and the commanding officer is obliged to exact an immediate reform, or bring the delinquents before a court martial. Orders are issued from these headquarters to be obeyed, and in future no excuse will be received for non-compliance with regimental orders. The presence of *all* company officers for duty is required with their several companies at the stated roll calls, reveille, retreat and tattoo . . . The commissioned officers will give more of their attention to their companies in an endeavor to promote the soldierly bearing and efficiency of the regiment. The commanding officer trusts that no further orders on the subject will be necessary.³⁷

But further orders on the subject *were* necessary.

Besides a lackadaisical attitude toward duty, some officers also set their men a poor example in other areas of conduct. At the request of Colonel Tomkins, Adjutant Pitkin asked Lieutenant A.J. Grover to submit "an immediate report in writing of the authority you had for taking from Company E, while in command of the same, the following articles: one saddle, two pairs of drawers, and one pair of stockings."³⁸ Nine months later, Colonel Sawyer ordered Lieutenant E.G. Edwards of Burlington to

report immediately in writing to these headquarters whether he sold to Sutler E. Walker, on or about the 6th day of June last, for the sum of \$50, a large bay gelding horse, and if so, state whether the horse so sold was the private property of him, the said Edwards, and if so, when and where he got his title to said horse, and of whom he purchased it, and the price paid therefor.³⁹

With a going price of \$120-\$140 paid by the government for horses bought for the cavalry and artillery, it is highly unlikely that Lieutenant Edwards could have demonstrated valid title to a horse that he had sold for a mere \$50. The important point lies not in the guilt or innocence of the two lieutenants, but in the unlikelihood of such officers having the moral authority to make their men obey orders prohibiting the taking of private property or the misappropriation of government property.

The only means that commanding officers had for getting rid of lazy, incompetent, ignorant, malingering or dishonest officers was to put pressure on them to resign, or, in extreme cases, to have them dismissed from the service. Dismissal was a lengthy process requiring the approval of a long series of officers along the chain of command. Nor was the

process free from political influences. Captain F.T. Huntoon of Rutland was "dismissed from the service of the United States, with loss of all pay and allowances now due, or that may become due . . . for disgraceful conduct in allowing his picket guard to be captured." and Lieutenant E.H. Higley of Castleton, who had been promoted to that rank from orderly sergeant, was similarly dismissed for "cowardice."⁴⁰

One of the strangest such cases on record, in the First Vermont or any other cavalry regiment, was that of Lieutenant Jed P. Clark of Highgate and St. Albans. Colonel Tomkins reported to Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, that

On the morning of the [26th] day of [June], 1862, while the regiment was stationed at Middletown [Virginia], Lieutenant Clark came into camp and stated that he had been taken prisoner by some of the enemy while absent from camp the previous evening (and while within our own lines) and by them released upon his parole of honor not again to serve against [them] unless or until duly exchanged. He is now absent with leave in accordance with orders received to that effect. Since he has left the regiment on leave, I have come to the deliberate conclusion that the whole affair is a "canard" upon his part to rid himself of active duty while he retains his rank and pay. Many of the officers of my regiment agree with me in this opinion. Adding to this the facts that his trunk was packed and sent home several days before the affair happened, that the horse which he claims was shot under him (as he says) was a horse belonging to the government . . . I think the evidence is conclusive against him, and I most respectfully recommend that the said . . . Clark . . . be discharged from the military service of the U.S.⁴¹

Tomkins asked for Clark's dismissal (which was ordered four months later, on November 19, 1862) after efforts to persuade him to resign failed.⁴²

Even dismissals from the service did not provide a wholly reliable weapon for commanding officers. Captain George H. Bean of Pownal was "dishonorably dismissed" on October 11, 1862.⁴³ Five weeks later — and one can only guess at the influences that may have been at work in the meantime — Bean's dismissal was revoked and he was restored to the command of his company, only to be dismissed for the second and final time in the following April "for cowardly conduct in the face of the enemy."⁴⁴ Political pressure, such as in the reinstatement of Colonel Sawyer, played a role in these matters, adding to the already heavy burdens of regimental commanders. Colonel Tomkins made it clear that he would

. . . recommend for promotion, only such officers, non-commissioned officers and privates as display zeal in the performance of their duties and are possessed of sufficient military capacity for the performance of their duty, and as he disapproves of the practice of political influence influencing promotions, he wishes it understood that all have an equal chance.⁴⁵

The military sins of enlisted men were more easily dealt with than those of officers. At first, every wrongdoer had to be tried by a court-martial of three officers with all the formalities of a prosecutor, a counsel for the defense, and the preparation of an elaborate record of the proceedings. However, an Act of Congress of July 17, 1862, eliminated most of these formalities, and gave the commanding officer of the regiment or a designated deputy the power to hear and dispose of all but the most heinous cases of misconduct. The usual punishments meted out to the guilty included extra duty, confinement to the guard-house (sometimes on bread and water), bucking, bucking and gagging,⁴⁶ the carrying of a log, forfeiture of pay, and whatever else the ingenuity of judges could suggest and the Army Regulations allowed. For example, Private John H. Willard of Hartland was convicted of mutinous conduct and sentenced "to forfeit \$10 per month [of \$13] of his pay for one year, to wear for one month on his left ankle a chain six feet long with a ball weighing twelve pounds attached thereto, and to have his head and beard shaved." General George Stoneman, who, as brigade commander, had the duty of reviewing all court-martial sentences, approved and confirmed Willard's punishment "with the exception of the words 'and beard,' this not being among the punishments prescribed by Army Regulations."⁴⁷

The usual punishment for corporals and sergeants convicted of misconduct was reduction to the ranks. "For contracting a disease of his own seeking, thereby rendering him unfit for military duty," Commissary Sergeant Rufus G. Barber, Co. A, was "broken." First Sergeant C.M. Cook of Georgia received the same punishment for "unsoldierly conduct," and Sergeant-Major H.D. Smith of Fairfax was deprived of his chevrons by Colonel Sawyer "for insolent conduct toward his superior officer, and for writing letters to the press, reflecting upon his colonel."⁴⁸

Because orders rarely reflect the things done properly, the use of these regimental and company order and letter books has risks. They are filled with dozens of orders, chiding and admonishing officers and men for their military shortcomings, ordering them to do (or to refrain from doing) things which should have been done (or not done) as a matter of course. They recite a multitude of punishments, ranging from the trivial to dismissals from the service on the gravest of charges. The volume of such adverse material can create a wholly distorted picture of the quality of the regiment. Clearly, such evidence cannot be disregarded. It presents an important facet of the life of a regiment of volunteers, and it sheds a vivid light on conditions that caused the war to drag on for four years and to be so costly in lives and treasure. But the negative

impression it creates must be tempered by, and weighed against, the fighting record of the regiment, which became without question one of the more effective mounted units in the Union armies.⁴⁹ A just verdict on the troopers of the First Vermont Cavalry, in the light of *all* the evidence, would conclude that they were poor soldiers but good fighting men.

The validity of the latter half of this verdict is borne out in part by most of the information about the regiment in the *Official Records*, and in part by another set of entries in the order and letter books. As the original set of officers elected for the most part for reasons that had nothing to do with their military capabilities left the service one by one, enlisted men promoted to commissioned rank on merit took their places. Sergeants Frank Ray and Henry Dwight Smith were two of the many non-commissioned officers promoted to second lieutenant; Mason A. Stone was one of two men who went from private to first lieutenant in one jump.⁵⁰ Several of the enlisted men promoted to second lieutenant went on to become first lieutenants and captains. And, too, whenever the regiment settled down in camp for any length of time, daily drills were ordered, and classes were started to teach newly-promoted commissioned and non-commissioned officers the tactics and Army Regulations, and to refresh the knowledge of older officers.⁵¹

The order and letter books also contain numerous entries dealing with the state of the arms, equipment, clothing, and especially the horses of the regiment. One learns of an appalling wastage of horses, due to exposure, overwork, epidemics of disease, starvation, inadequate care and outright abuse, leaving at times half or more of the regiment dismounted and useless as cavalry. In January, 1864, Colonel Sawyer reported that the 943 troopers then in camp had between them 112 serviceable and 230 unserviceable horses; 601 of the men had no horses. Another report states that in one seven-month period the regiment lost 305 horses from all causes.⁵²

In short, a great variety of both important and trivial incidents and problems in the four-year career of the First Vermont Cavalry are reflected in these books. In what other army and in what other war would the adjutant of one of almost 2000 regiments have written the following letter to no less a personage than the Quartermaster-General of the Union armies, who had the responsibility of providing the endless variety and the huge quantities of supplies, equipment, uniforms and animals needed to keep an army of nearly two million men in the field:

I have the honor to transmit herewith a special requisition for stationery for use of the adjutant's office of this regiment, to which I would respectfully ask your approval. The supply of stationery furnished the regimental adjutant is inadequate to the demands of the official busi-

ness transacted in this office, in consequence of the numerous special and regular reports which he is required to prepare, and other increased official business which can not be adjusted with the blanks furnished by the Adjutant General's office. The supply furnished by the quartermaster for the present quarter is entirely exhausted, and the adjutant is compelled to purchase stationery . . . Thy stationery has been frugally used, and care taken that none is wasted.⁵³

Anyone who can see the contemporary relevance of the poor adjutant's problems, and sympathize with his distress over the "numerous special and regular reports" he was required to prepare, must hope that General Montgomery C. Meigs found time amidst the multiplicity of his other and more important duties to approve this irresistible petition.

NOTES

¹37th Congress, 2nd Session, House of Representatives, Executive Document No. 116; Preliminary Report on the Eighth Census, 1860 (Washington, 1862), 286. The exact number of Vermonters in the Army was 32,459. G. G. Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War* (Burlington, 1886-88), II, 790.

²The three companies of sharpshooters became a part of the First and Second Regiments of United States Sharpshooters, organized by Col. Hiram Berdan, and known as Berdan's Rifles. To be eligible to join, a candidate, firing from the shoulder, had to hit ten times out of ten a 10-inch diameter circle at a distance of 200 yards. Benedict, *Vermont*, II, 732.

³*Ibid.*, II, 534.

⁴Across the numerous letters from governors, offering mounted troops to the government, Secretary of War Simon Cameron wrote for the instruction of his clerks, "Accept no cavalry." In one such letter, Governor Richard Yates of Illinois pleaded, "Now, Mr. Cameron, please do accept my ten cavalry companies." *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, 1880-1901), Series III, I, 77, 228, 272. (Cited hereafter as *Official Records*.)

⁵Benedict, *Vermont*, II, 534.

⁶In late 1862 and early 1863, two more companies, also recruited in Vermont, were added to the regiment, raising it to the normal twelve company (three battalion) roster of a cavalry regiment.

⁷Benedict, *Vermont*, II, 536.

⁸*Ibid.*, II, 535.

⁹*Ibid.*, II, 542.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, II, 568. In June, 1862, the regiment received Colt's army revolvers, a much better weapon. At the same time four entire companies were armed with carbines. Not until the end of 1862 was the entire regiment armed with carbines.

¹¹*Ibid.*, II, 543.

¹²" . . . in sending reinforcements to the field, Heaven grant that they may not be organized into fresh regiments, as they were, at ruinous and suicidal cost . . . formed into new regiments to swell the vanity of more of those insolent incapables who so foully disgraced their uniform; even to the last year of the war, such regiments indulged in stampedes that a member of the old corps would have blushed to be involved in. At Five Forks, April 1, 1865 . . . such a green regiment, six hundred strong, was driven back in disgraceful panic after less than 5 minutes' firing, with their colonel . . . at the head of the fugitives. An old regiment, depleted by the war to only forty-five carbines, was then advanced, and held the position till dark . . . their officers had risen from the ranks, and the men knew them . . ." A Volunteer Cavalryman [Frederick Whittaker], *Volunteer Cavalry — The Lessons of a Decade* (New York, 1871), p. 32.

¹³Benedict, *Vermont*, II, 694. Benedict's statement that two officers were dishonorably discharged is incorrect. The number was higher.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, II, 533-694.

¹⁵Thomas Crofts, *History of the Service of the Third Ohio Veteran Volunteer Cavalry* (Toledo, 1910), pp. 5, 210.

¹⁶Stephen Z. Starr, "The Grand Old Regiment," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, XLVIII, No 1 (Autumn, 1964), 21-31; 24.

¹²Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes spoke for an entire generation when he said, "Through our great good fortune, in our youth our hearts were touched with fire. It was given to us to learn at the outset that life is a profound and passionate thing." *Speeches by Oliver Wendell Holmes* (Boston, 1918), p. 11.

¹³Starr, "Grand Old Regiment," 27. Not the least of Bruce Catton's contributions to Civil War historiography was to recognize the value of regimental histories as an important source.

¹⁴War Department regulations gave each trooper an annual clothing allowance of \$42. Each item of clothing issued to him was charged against his allowance, which was ample to cover normal wear and tear, but did not allow for the inferior quality of much of the clothing issued nor for the dreadful waste typical of the entire army.

¹⁵The Quartermaster's Department supplied heavy ragpaper of excellent quality and a good grade of black ink for these records. After the lapse of a hundred years, they are still in excellent condition. The spelling of the soldier clerks who kept the records is shaky, but their handwriting is nearly always neat and easy to read.

¹⁶Edward P. Tobie, *History of the First Maine Cavalry, 1861-1865* (Boston, 1887), p. 736. A small minority of regimental historians do describe the misdeeds of their comrades, but as one would expect, even a historian who will speak of the predatory habits of his fellow-troopers will refrain from discussing their deplorable lack of cleanliness.

¹⁷General Orders No. 13, Nov. 13, 1862. Collins was in command as senior major in the absence of Colonel Sawyer and Lieutenant-Colonel A.W. Preston, who had been promoted to that rank after Lieutenant-Colonel George B. Kellogg's dismissal from the service for being absent without leave. Special Orders No. 289, War Department, Adjutant-General's Office, Oct. 11, 1862. These citations, and all citations hereafter unless otherwise noted, are to First Vermont Volunteer Cavalry, Regimental and Company Order and Letter Books, National Archives, Washington. These books are unpaginated, and citations must therefore be by order number and/or date.

¹⁸The letter from Simeon Pease Cheney paraphrased here is headed Dorset, Vt., November 17, 1884. It forms part of a "Letter to the Editor" by E.S. Lee published in *The Vermonter*, 45, 117. "Denmark," a tune still popular in Cheney's period is by the English cleric and psalm tune composer Martin Madan (1726-90).

¹⁹This detail is recorded in J.R. Hilliard, "One hundred and fifty years," *The Vermonter*, 39, 259-61.

²⁰William M. Newton, *History of Barnard, Vermont, with family genealogies, 1761-1927* (Montpelier, 1928), II, 125. The author prefers Runnels, *Sanbornton*, who spells the name "Chamberlain."

²¹Newton, *Barnard*, I, 297. For a description of the Attwoods see II, 27. See also I, 192 and 297.

²²*Ibid.*, I, 297.

²³*Ibid.*, I, 300.

²⁴Runnels, *Sanbornton*, II, 127.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶Cushman MSS, Moses Ela Cheney to Mrs. Harriet Cushman, Barnard, Vt., April 4, 1879.

²⁷*Ibid.*, Moses Ela Cheney to Mrs. Harriet Cushman, Barnard, Vt., July 21, 1881.

²⁸*Ibid.*, Moses Ela Cheney to Mrs. Harriet Cushman, Barnard, Vt., July 12, 1878.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰Letter dated Jan. 21, 1864, to Capt. L.G. Estes, Assistant Adjutant General, Third Cavalry Division.

³¹*E.g.*, General Orders No. 2, April 10, 1863.

³²Special Orders No. 1, May 28, 1862. Tomkins was promoted from lieutenant, Second United States Cavalry, to colonel of volunteers, and given command of the First Vermont Cavalry, following the tragic suicide of Colonel Holliday. Tomkins had made a name for himself early in the war. Ordered on May 21, 1861, to reconnoiter the Fairfax Court House, Virginia area, he went beyond his orders, led his fifty-man detachment in a charge into the town, and returned with five prisoners and two captured horses. General Irvin McDowell endorsed his report with the comment, "The skirmish has given considerable prestige to our regular cavalry . . . but the lieutenant acted without authority, and went further than he knew he was desired or expected to go . . . He has been so informed . . . and whilst in the future he will be no less gallant, he will be more circumspect." Tomkins got into further trouble because his report "was given to the public through the columns of the New York Tribune." *Official Records*, Series I, II, 60-61.

³³Letter, Adjutant Edgar Pitkin to Lieut. A.J. Grover, June 26, 1862.

³⁴Special Orders No. 48, March 13, 1863.

³⁵Huntoon was cashiered by Special Orders No. 139, Adjutant General's Office, Washington, March 25, 1863; Higley by Special Orders No. 158, Adjutant General's Office, Washington April 6, 1863. Both officers owed their dismissals to John Mosby, the most enterprising of Confederate guerrillas, who captured them and their commands on March 2 and March 16, respectively. Cf. *Official Records*, Series I, XXV, Part I, 41; 71-73. Benedict, who tells the story in detail, states that Higley was made the

scapegoat for the March 16 affair by Major C.F. Taggart of the Second Pennsylvania Cavalry, the officer really at fault, and that the military commission which subsequently investigated the incident "found no ground for the charges of cowardice and breach of duty, and upon its recommendation, the Secretary of War ordered the restoration of Lieutenant Higley to his rank and command." Benedict, *Vermont*, II, 582-85.

⁴¹Letter, Tomkins to Secretary of War Stanton, July 22, 1862. It will be noted that Clark was away from camp when he was "captured."

⁴²Tomkins had written Clark on July 3, 1862, to ask him to resign "as there is no prospect of your immediate exchange, the regiment and country will be entirely deprived of your services, and as there is an imperative necessity that the regiment and company should have the full complement of officers . . . you should resign the position you occupy while you are not discharging any of its duties." Eventually, Clark did decide to resign; his sketchy service record (RG94, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's-1917; C1248, U.S. 1862; National Archives, Washington) contains a copy made in 1900 of the acceptance on Nov. 17, 1862, of his resignation. Nevertheless, he was cashiered on Nov. 19, by Special Orders No. 353, Adjutant General's Office, Washington. The service record also contains a Nov. 26, 1862, letter of Clark's to the Adjutant General, asking that publication of the order dismissing him from the service be withheld to enable him to prove that he was not guilty of "feigning capture." There is nothing to show what action, if any, was taken pursuant to this letter.

⁴³Special Orders No. 289, Adjutant General's Office, Washington.

⁴⁴Special Orders No. 13, Nov. 21, 1862; Special Orders No. 193, Adjutant General's Office, Washington, April 28, 1863.

⁴⁵Unnumbered order, August 6, 1862.

⁴⁶"Bucking" was a painful form of punishment. The culprit's wrists and ankles were tied, his elbows placed on either side of his knees, and a stout stick was then passed over his elbows and under his knees. To make the punishment more severe, the culprit also had a gag placed in his mouth; this was "bucking and gagging."

⁴⁷General Orders No. 64, Oct. 20, 1862. Williard's misconduct must have been exceptionally heinous to justify so severe a sentence, the most serious part of which was the forfeiture of \$10 of his \$13 monthly pay for a year.

⁴⁸Special Orders No. 26, April 16, 1865; Special Orders No. 84, undated; Special Orders No. 21, Dec. 23, 1862.

⁴⁹It should be said also that the regimental and company order and letter books of seven other volunteer cavalry regiments (First Massachusetts, Second Michigan, Second Iowa, Third Ohio, Seventh Pennsylvania, Fifth New York, First Rhode Island) studied in detail by the author, show much the same picture as do the records of the First Vermont. The names, dates and wording are different, but the conditions vary only in details.

⁵⁰Col. Tomkins to Peter T. Washburn, Adjutant General of the State of Vermont, August 7, 1862; Col. Sawyer to the same, Sept. 24, 1863; Special Orders No. 90, Sept. 9, 1863.

⁵¹It is pleasing to note that Lieut. Higley, reinstated as lieutenant in Co. I and his good name restored, was in charge of instructing the non-commissioned officers. Circulars of Jan. 10 and Jan. 29, 1864.

⁵²Report, Col. Sawyer to Gen. Montgomery C. Meigs, Jan. 20, 1864. The period covered was May 1 to Dec. 1, 1863. On Oct. 15, 1862, Sawyer had proposed to Gen. Meigs that he be authorized to send a "responsible officer" to Vermont to purchase good horses for the regiment, instead of having issued to it the inferior animals that were being supplied to the government by unscrupulous contractors. The proposal was approved, and Lieut. Col. A.W. Preston was ordered to "proceed to Vermont for the purpose of purchasing horses to remount the regiment." Special Orders No. 40, Oct. 20, 1862. Other entries dealing wholly or partly with the problem of keeping the regiment mounted are a report of Feb. 16, 1864, General Orders No. 28, 1862, General Orders (not numbered), July 9, 1862, General Orders No. 9, July 29, 1862, General Orders (not numbered), August 6, 1862, Circulars of August 25 and Sept. 10, 1862, and Special Orders No. 78, May 9, 1863.

⁵³Clarence D. Gates, First Vermont Cavalry, to General Montgomery C. Meigs, Feb. 5, 1864.