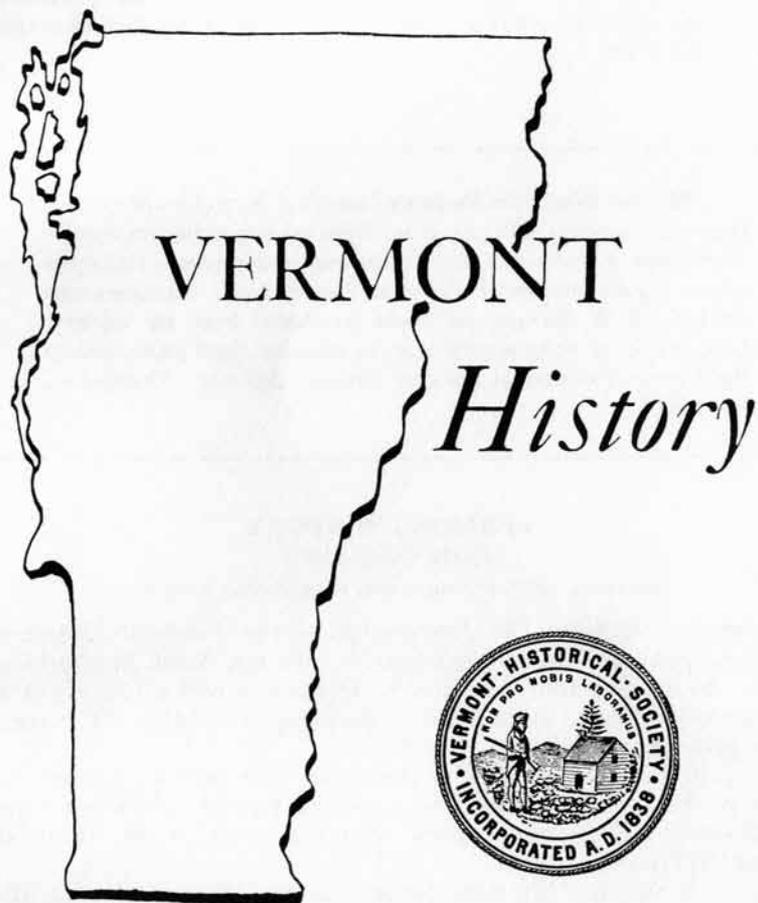
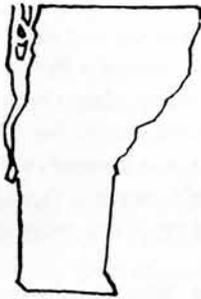


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“. . . on the battlefield the odds of surviving against Confederates were often better than surviving in camp”

Potomac Fever: The Hazards of Camp Life

by KENNETH LINK

In the cold, wet darkness of a February morning in 1862, Wilbur Fisk, a Vermont soldier, stood on picket duty near Lewinsville, Virginia. In the snow and slush that covered the ground Fisk paced back and forth, guarding his beat. His nearest comrades stood two hundred yards on either side of him; along the picket line standing orders banned fires;¹ and unsuccessful efforts to keep warm had interrupted the four hours of rest he had the night before in a house in Lewinsville. Fisk was alone and cold and tired; most of all he was lonely. When he returned to camp that morning, he described the emptiness and loneliness of the night he had spent on picket duty. “The veil of night . . . shrouded everything in gloom,” he wrote. “No sound charms the ear, nor sight greets the eye—nothing but dull vacancy. The moments seem oppressively long, and the pickets wear long faces. . . . At such a time how natural for the mind to revert back to the pleasant homes we have left behind. We almost fancy we can see the family circle gathered around the fireside, and hear them speaking of the absent one.” But Fisk refused to allow the discomfort and loneliness of army life to consume and debilitate him. In the same letter he expressed the pride he felt when he considered the importance of his service. “When we reflect that we are standing on the outer verge of all that is left of the American Union, and nothing but darkness and rebellion is beyond, and that we are actually guarding our own homes and firesides from treason’s usurpations, we feel a thrill of pride that we are permitted to assist in maintaining our beloved Government.”²

During this winter of 1862 many of Fisk’s comrades shared his ambivalence about the sacrifices soldiering required, and their ambivalence revealed a radical and discouraging change in the mood of the army. Six months before, these same soldiers had been excited and confident and

even cocky. If they had one desire in common, it was to march into "rebel-dom" and "bag" a Confederate, as one of their generals had put it.³ Thus, on the night of October 9, 1861, when over ten thousand Pennsylvania boys crossed Chain Bridge on their way to Langley, they cheered enthusiastically as their bands played "Dixie."⁴ A month earlier the first camp established in the area, Camp Advance, got its name because of the soldiers' impressions that their movement into Virginia meant a "speedy advance on Richmond."⁵ For these eager boys fighting could not come too soon.

Officers shared their men's excitement and eagerness. While lumbermen from the Sixth Maine boisterously chopped oak near Fort Marcy, General W.F. Smith rode up to Winfield Scott Hancock, their Brigade Commander, and asked what the uproar meant. "Oh," replied Hancock, "that is my Sixth Maine Regiment axing its way to Richmond."⁶ George Gordon Meade, Commander of the Second Brigade in General McCall's Pennsylvania Division at Langley, heard on November 12, 1861, of the success five days earlier of Captain Samuel F. Dupont at the Battle of Port Royal, South Carolina. That evening he wrote his wife from Langley that the victory "has inspirited all of us, and the talk is now, When are we going to do something? I should not be surprised if a movement was made in a few days. For my part I hope so."⁷

In the soldiers' early months of service on the Virginia side of the Potomac excitement flourished amid speculations of advances and fighting and the more mundane requirements and dull routine of organizing and training amateur volunteers. Organization came first. By the time Wilbur Fisk wrote in February, 1862, about his feelings on a Lewinsville picket line, brigade and division organization had varied but little for months. Fisk himself was in the Second Vermont Regiment, which along with the Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Vermont Volunteers made up *Brooks' Brigade* or the *Vermont Brigade*.⁸ General W.F. Smith's Division, of which the Vermont Brigade was a part, also included *Stevens' Brigade*, the Thirty-third New York, the Forty-seventh Pennsylvania, the Forty-ninth New York, and the Seventy-ninth New York;⁹ *Hancock's Brigade*, the Forty-ninth Pennsylvania, Sixth Maine, Forty-third New York, and Fifth Wisconsin;¹⁰ and *Casey's Provisional Brigade* which consisted of the Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth New Jersey Volunteers, the Fortieth and One hundredth Pennsylvania Regiments, and the Fourth New Hampshire.¹¹ In October, 1861, some twenty thousand men served in Smith's Division.¹²

The Vermont Brigade encamped on and around Smoot's hill, more commonly referred to today as Salona.¹³ * Stevens' Brigade, consisting of New Yorkers one officer scornfully called a pack of "loafers and thieves,"¹⁴

General W.F. Smith flanked by General Winfield Scott Hancock and General John A. Newton.

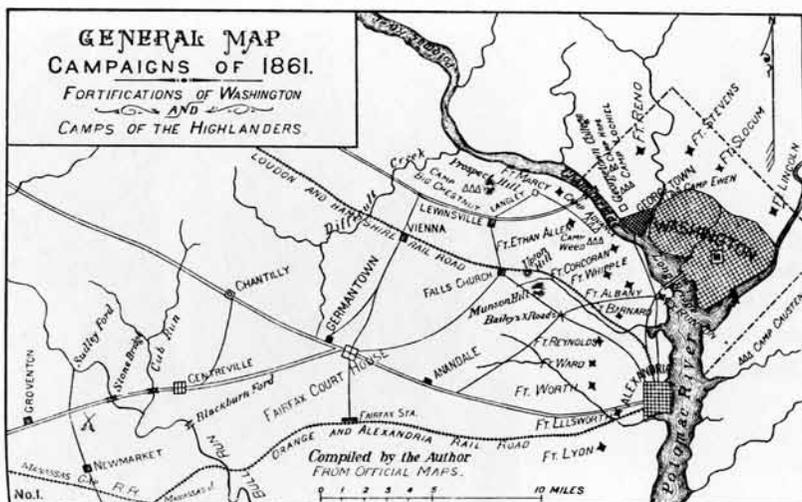


camped closer to Lewinsville on and near the Reverend David Mutersbaugh's farm.¹⁵ Hancock's Brigade could not have been far away as the brigade hospital for a time was at the stone house now known as Benvenue. At the time of the war it belonged to John Johnson, a Confederate sympathizer.¹⁶ These camps were known collectively as Camp Griffin.¹⁷

In addition to Smith's Division, three Pennsylvania brigades at Langley added another ten thousand soldiers to the defense of Washington. These brigades made up General George McCall's Pennsylvania Volunteer Reserve Corps, who crossed into Virginia in October and established camps (Camp Pierpont) extending along both sides of Georgetown Pike from the Mackall farm in Langley to Sharon, the estate belonging to the family of Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones.¹⁸

As long as the Army held out the prospect of an expeditious confrontation with the enemy, the soldiers at Camps Griffin and Pierpont accepted as necessary, if not welcome, the picketing and training and the hard but dull routine which marked their service in northern Virginia. These con-

*Albert C. Eisenberg, "'The 3rd Vermont has won a name:' Corporal George Q. French's Account of the Battle of Lee's Mills, Virginia," *Vermont History*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Fall, 1981), pp. 223-231 provides an account of some of the Vermonters who crossed Chain Bridge to guard the approaches to Washington and to help construct Ft. Ethan Allen.



From William Todd, *The Seventy-Ninth Highlanders: New York Volunteers in the War of Rebellion* (Albany: Press of Brandon, Barton and Co., 1886).

ditions became increasingly loathsome as weeks passed without any sign of preparation for movement against the enemy. In February a sergeant at Pierpont expressed his impatience, complaining that "We are still in the same place that we were three months ago and we are all getting tired of this inactivity. The almost universal question is 'Why don't we do something?' It is answered by the short but comprehensive words 'not ready.'"¹⁹ One week later an officer at Camp Griffin expressed the same malaise: "We have lain still here till we have grown into old foggism—gone to seed. So little advance, so little progress we have made . . . that should Methuselah offer us today a shake of his hand, we should wonder whether it was yesterday or a week ago that we parted from him, so little has been the change here since his advent." As the inactivity continued, cynicism grew. "The whole atmosphere to-night vibrates with the sounds of preparation to advance," Alfred Castleman wrote in January. "The new Secretary of War says 'advance.' We are getting daily dispatches from Gen. McClellan asking, 'Are you ready?' I have no faith."²⁰ Many soldiers must have sensed a heavy irony years after the war when they considered their impatience with non-combative activities and their optimism and relief when they finally left Camps Griffin and Pierpont.

They did leave. The interminable days of drilling, picketing, and waiting ended at midnight on March 9, 1862, when the command ordered that each soldier should have two days' rations cooked and should be prepared to march at 3 a.m.²¹ The band that struck up "O, Carry Me Back to Old

Virginny" as soldiers abandoned Camp Griffin was silenced by cries of "Stop that!" "Dry up." "Cheese it!" and "Give Us a Rest." The next tune, "We'll gang na mair to your town," more acceptable to the now bouyant volunteers, was itself drowned out by the singing of more martial tunes such as "John Brown's Body" and "Rally Round the Flag, Boys."²² The men in Smith's Division were on their way to the Virginia peninsula; they had had enough of Camp Griffin.

The men who felt a "thrill of pride," as Wilbur Fisk had said in February, when they reflected that they were "actually guarding our homes and firesides from treason's usurpations;" the men who with easy bonhomie sang "John Brown's Body" as they abandoned Camp Griffin in March; the men who the previous September joked about "axing their way to Richmond" and "bagging" the enemy got a chance to do more than talk. During the next four years the struggle tested the strength of their desire to fight many times. What surprised these men and other Americans after the soldiers left Camps Griffin and Pierpont was that the Peninsula Campaign would be inconclusive. Americans had begun to sense that this war would drag on; fighting would continue. For F.W. Smith's Division the fighting would continue. Ahead for these men lay Lee's Mills, Crampton's Gap, Marye's Heights, Sharpsburg, the Wilderness, Gettysburg, Cold Harbor, Petersburg, and a host of other encounters with the enemy, their names etched forever in the American consciousness in blood and suffering.

The grim statistics demonstrated the price these men paid. Wilbur Fisk's Second Vermont, for instance, had a ratio of killed and mortally wounded that was eight times greater than the general ratio in the Union army. Out of 1,858 officers and enlisted men serving in this regiment no fewer than 751 (40 percent) were killed or wounded in action.²³ Other Vermont regiments also suffered heavy losses; the Third Vermont saw 624 (34 percent) of its officers and men killed or wounded in action; the Fourth Vermont 577 (34 percent); the Fifth Vermont 677 (41 percent); and the Sixth Vermont 584 (34 percent) killed or wounded.²⁴

Few soldiers realized it as they left Lewinsville, but they had already faced an enemy much more formidable and far less vulnerable to their heroics than any they would meet on the battlefield. They often lost their fight with this enemy because it had all the advantages. It was "unpredictable, mysterious in origin, and uncontrollable,"²⁵ and it was deadly. Against the Fourth Vermont who suffered a thirty-four percent casualty rate, for example, it killed more men than the Confederates killed on the battlefield.²⁶

The military had names for the tangible enemy—secessionists, rebs, Johnny Reb, or Confederates. The places where thousands of soldiers died

in combat—Antietam, Gettysburg, the Wilderness—attained in military history an importance and aura and honor. The same military, however, had no name for their more intimidating enemy; the places it struck—Benvenue, Sharon, Langley, Salona—did not enter the history books and live on in the American memory as places of national suffering and sacrifice. It was not until years later that this mysterious enemy was even identified as pathogenic micro-organisms which caused “natural biological warfare—on a large scale,” as one physician put it.²⁷

Benvenue and Salona—hardly household words. Military histories fail to explain their importance and hardly ever even mention them by name. But the soldiers remembered, for it was in the Lewinsville-Langley community and other often forgotten places that the pathogens—the silent carriers of death—worked some of their worst mischief. To most observers, hearty Vermont boys averaging five feet ten inches in height with standard bearers six feet six inches and six feet eight inches,²⁸ boys hardened by the rigors of hill farm life, seemed unlikely victims of disease. Yet a January 28, 1862, report from the Surgeon General of the Army told a different story: “The Vermont regiments in Brooks’ brigade give us the largest ratio of sick of all the troops in the army, and that ratio has not essentially varied for the last three months.”²⁹ Regimental surgeons confirmed the seriousness of the situation. In November Surgeon Allen of the Fourth Vermont reported that two hundred men of the Fourth were in the hospital. One month later, on December 9, the number had jumped dramatically, as Allen reported that four hundred of the Fourth were being treated in the hospital.³⁰ To make matters worse, numerous others of the Vermont men were sick enough to be excused from duty and confined to their tents.³¹ During these early months of the war the sickness in most other units in the army seemed comparatively insignificant to the experience of the Vermont Brigade. In November, for instance, Charles Tripler, Surgeon General and Medical Director of the Army of the Potomac, reported that “12 Massachusetts regiments averaged 50 sick each [,] 35 Pennsylvania regiments averaged 61 sick each [,and] 5 Vermont regiments averaged 144 sick each.”³²

When the news of the Vermont boys’ suffering reached home, the State sent Dr. Edward E. Phelps to Camp Griffin to investigate. Phelps found nothing encouraging to report to the citizens back home. On December 12 he wrote that out of 4,939 men in the Vermont Brigade, 1,086, or about 25 percent, were excused from duty because of sickness.³³ The next month saw some improvement in two regiments but a deterioration in three others. Tripler’s report to General S. Williams, Assistant-Adjutant-General of the Army of the Potomac, reinforced Phelps’ findings.³⁴ (See Table 1.)

TABLE I
Sickness in the Vermont Brigade
(January 1862 Report)

<i>Regiment</i>	<i>Mean strength</i>	<i>Number sick</i>	<i>Percent sick</i>
Second Vermont	1,021	87	8.53
Third Vermont	900	84	9.33
Fourth Vermont	1,047	244	23.30
Fifth Vermont	1,000	271	27.10
Sixth Vermont	970	224	23.00
Total Brigade	4,938	910	18.42

Only one other regiment in Smith's Division presented statistics as depressing as those from the Vermont Brigade. In January the illness in that regiment, the Forty-ninth Pennsylvania in Hancock's Brigade, moved a surgeon from another unit to write that the Forty-ninth Pennsylvania "is in dreadful condition. Very many of them are sick, and of very grave diseases."³⁵ The Surgeon-General's statistics reflected the truth of this observation. He reported that out of 850 boys in the Forty-ninth Pennsylvania, 149 (17.53 percent) were sick. The other three regiments in this brigade had lower percentages of sick—8.19 percent, 9.2 percent and 6.41 percent.³⁶

The frequency with which Tripler communicated with the high command about the "disease ridden Vermont brigade" underscored the urgent desire at the highest levels for answers and solutions. They wanted to know why the number of sick in the Vermont Brigade was higher than the number in any other unit. They had sufficient clothing, Tripler reported, and according to a hospital inspector, the police of all the regiments was satisfactory, as was the condition of their tents. The locations of the camps of the Fifth and Sixth Vermont presented drainage problems, but so did the Third's; and that regiment had the fewest number of sick in the brigade—eighty-four in January.³⁷ The Surgeon-General had few answers; for the most part, the origins of the sickness in the Vermont Brigade would remain an unfathomable mystery.

The diseases which crippled regiments and bewildered and frustrated the high command consisted of two broad kinds: childhood diseases (measles, mumps, chicken pox, and whooping cough) and camp diseases (diarrhea, dysentery, malaria, typhoid fever, and respiratory tract infections). The infectious diseases of childhood struck first. In the state camps of assembly and in the central training camps where large numbers of disease-susceptible recruits assembled, the childhood diseases—especially measles—often infected as many as thirty percent of the members of a regiment.³⁸ This was true of the Third Vermont, a regiment in which

one-third of the men suffered from an outbreak of measles before they even left Camp Baxter at St. Johnsbury.³⁹ A month before arriving in Washington, Alfred Castleman, surgeon of the Fifth Wisconsin, wrote that three hundred in this regiment had already been infected.⁴⁰ Thousands of others had the experiences of Vermont and Wisconsin soldiers. The Union army reported altogether 76,318 cases of measles which caused 5,177 deaths. Even these high figures understate the seriousness of the disease. Measles actually caused deaths attributed to other causes through the complications connected with the disease. Measley boys frequently developed acute and chronic bronchitis and pneumonia, and doctors reported under these sequels to the disease rather than to the measles itself.⁴¹

When, in December, 1861, Dr. Phelps made his report on the condition of Vermont soldiers at Camp Griffin, the number of cases of measles was decreasing. By this time the problems were the camp diseases, which Phelps identified as remittent and intermittent fevers (malaria), typhoid, pneumonia, and diarrhea.⁴² Because of its unusually high number of victims and high mortality rate and the susceptibility of its victims to relapses and repeated attacks, diarrhea, or the organisms which caused it, became the army's most troubling disease. Out of 1,739,135 reported cases during the war over 44,000 men died of the disease. The effects of diarrhea ranged in severity from a "benign, mild, 'walking' purging to protracted, painful, febrile, half-hourly, blood and pus evacuations." Over a period of weeks the disease could be devastating, leaving many soldiers "emaciated victims."⁴³ Large numbers of boys in Northern Virginia suffered the most virulent type; grim figures revealed that in October and November 280 men died of diarrhea.⁴⁴ Milder cases of the disease affected such large numbers at Camps Griffin and Pierpont that army commanders instructed officers to make allowances on marches for men so afflicted. "Men requiring to leave the ranks to attend to the wants of nature," the order read, "will leave their muskets and knapsacks with the men of their company so as to join the column as soon as possible."⁴⁵

The second most common camp disease, which claimed 1,200,000 victims, was malaria, a disease which peaked in September and October and hit the Union troops from New England, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota the hardest.⁴⁶ Although the mortality rate among malaria victims was low, the disability and morbidity associated with the disease was high and, most frustrating, the disease had a hydra-headed quality about it. Because of its many types and the lack of cross immunity in its victims, a "soldier could serially or simultaneously have several [malarial] infections."⁴⁷ To doctors Allen and Childs of the Fourth Vermont Regiment this meant that during two months in the fall of 1861 they



General W.T.H. Brooks and staff with Dr. Edward E. Phelps (right), Surgeon.

treated the same disease in the same soldiers time and time again. A soldier came to the hospital, received treatment, got well, returned to his unit, and a few days later, much to the frustration and discouragement of Surgeons Allen and Childs, returned to sick call with the same disease. They reported treating two thousand cases in two months time for remittent and intermittent fever. The total number of victims was significantly lower, as the same victims suffered multiple cases of the same disease.⁴⁸

Typhoid fever was another serious camp disease, and it had a distressingly high mortality rate. In the entire army over 24 percent of the 148,631 cases resulted in death.⁴⁹ During the six months soldiers were stationed at Camps Griffin and Pierpont, the incidence of typhoid increased rapidly because the disease flourished among static troops. Moreover, the typhoid bacillus was no "respector of persons." For twenty-three days in December and January it incapacitated the man whose decisions shaped the fate of this army—General George McClellan.⁵⁰

As the authorities produced reports and wrung their hands in a futile search for solutions, the illness and death had a sobering effect on the soldiers in Lewinsville and Langley, especially the Vermont soldiers. As their ranks became decimated by the pathogens, the Vermonters turned

to religion; one eyewitness observed that prayer meetings, "numerously attended," took place every night.⁵¹ In one service a chaplain took as his text Isaiah 3:9-10:

The show of their countenance doth witness against them; and they declare their sin as Sodom, they hide it not. Woe unto their soul for they have rewarded evil unto themselves. Say ye to the righteous, that it shall be well with him: for they shall eat the fruit of their doings.⁵²

Apparently, Vermonters believed with their New England forebears in their own innate wickedness and accepted the chastisement from the scriptures. Perhaps hardship had weakened their sense of the absurd. In any case, the Vermonters in great numbers continued to attend services. In the early fall (during the construction of Fort Marcy) when the Brigade camped nearer Chain Bridge, Vermonters even brought in chaplains from other brigades to hold prayer meetings.⁵³ These meetings undoubtedly comforted many; for others they did little to assuage their anxiety and depression. The depression of one Vermonter so consumed him he took his own life by cutting his throat. As it happened, even in death he failed to escape Northern Virginia and the war; his comrades buried him near Chain Bridge.⁵⁴

While chaplains invoked help from on high, the Surgeon-General took other steps. Believing the "spectacle of so many of their comrades being sick and dying" exacerbated the problems, he sent a large number of convalescents to Philadelphia in order to make room for the sick from Vermont in the general hospital. It was hoped, Tripler reported, "that some beneficial effect might result to the well from removing the sick from their sight, and thus avoiding the depressing influence of so much sickness among their comrades."⁵⁵ Moving from the psychogenic origins of disease to the physical, Tripler recommended hot coffee immediately after reveille, whiskey twice a day for men on picket duty, and quinine to prevent malaria.⁵⁶ The state of Vermont also took measures to help alleviate the suffering and sent three assistant surgeons to Camp Griffin detailed for service in the Vermont Brigade.⁵⁷

An examination of conditions spawning disease and death in northern Virginia and in camps where soldiers trained before arriving at Camps Griffin and Pierpont sheds light on the life and hardships of the common soldier. One of the central training camps and distribution centers where soldiers first contracted disease was Camp Curtin. For months this camp in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, served as a rendezvous for regiment after regiment on their way to Washington and northern Virginia. Little was done to attend to the well-being and comfort of the men at Camp Curtin. With the grounds unpoliced and the weather intensely hot, Surgeon Alfred Castleman saw sickness in the Fifth Wisconsin increase rapidly. Before

leaving Camp Curtin in August, Castleman and his assistants had treated in the Fifth Wisconsin alone three hundred cases of measles and three hundred cases of diarrhea.⁵⁸ Hundreds of soldiers from other regiments contracted these diseases and others, probably through the water supplies. Ignorance of the consequences of using as a water source an open stream passing near uncovered latrines assured a high incidence of typhoid and dysentery.⁵⁹

In these circumstances the soldiers arriving in northern Virginia had little resistance to disease, and susceptibility to relapses and other infections was common, even under the best conditions. Camp Advance on the Virginia side of the Potomac did not provide the best conditions. The Fifth Vermont, which helped establish Camp Advance, found the trip from Pennsylvania trying. On September 27, 1861, the regiment marched seven hours in a driving rain storm to Chain Bridge after their guide had gotten lost. It was after ten p.m. when they arrived. All night that first night in Virginia they lay on wet ground without supper or shelter.⁶⁰

At Camp Advance these same soldiers labored in heavy fatigue duty in the construction of Fort Mott (later Fort Marcy) and Fort Ethan Allen. About this duty a soldier from Wisconsin wrote disdainfully that since he and his comrades "have been over here, we have been picketing and helping to build forts until you could not rest. It has been work, work until we have a belly full. Ever since we came into the field, we have been shoved from pillar to post until we have got to be the dirtiest, raggedest and sauciest regiment in the field. Another month . . . and we will be worse than Zouaves as they were worse than the Baptist church."⁶¹ During the day the soldiers worked on the forts, built roads and bridges, dug trenches and pits, chopped gigantic oaks to give range for artillery from the forts, and built up large earthmounds around the forts to resist attacks.⁶² It was backbreaking labor, and it was done when it was hot, "awfully hot," wrote one soldier.⁶³

Night brought little relief. After having worked all day the soldiers crawled "into brush houses shivering with cold and wet through [and prepared] to be raised up and stand in battleline. . . ." ⁶⁴ Many complained about the cold nights, "really cold, so much so that four Government blankets over you feel more comfortable than one, or none at all. We slept out last night with one blanket—many without any—so we know. . . . It takes some time to pull the hardy fellows [from New England] down, but you can see the marks on the faces of Maine and Vermont, made by the climate and exposure."⁶⁵

If the disastrous effect of exposure and severe fatigue duty on the morale and health of the men was known to officers, they showed callous indifference to the well-being of the army. They did little to alleviate the

conditions. When in October soldiers moved from Camp Advance to Smoot's hill (Salona) and vicinity near Lewinsville, they "lay on arms all night and suffered much from cold."⁶⁶

Besides heavy fatigue duty and exposure, soldiers in northern Virginia suffered the ill-effects of inadequate clothing and shabby tents. Wilbur Fisk of the Vermont Brigade wrote that his comrades were in serious want of clothing and that "It is a disgrace to Vermont that they should be allowed to be in this condition."⁶⁷ Another observed Fisk's unhappy view and reported the suffering in the Third Vermont after it established camp on the south side of the Pimmit directly behind Salona. The troops suffered, he maintained, because of a lack of "suitable and sufficient clothing. The tents were thin and leaky, the gray uniforms in which men left the state were faded, worn, and thin, and there was a lack of drawers and blankets."⁶⁸ The Second Vermont was also in bad shape. Soldiers in this regiment had been without overcoats during chilly autumn nights, and "cold rainstorms beat through their old and thin tents."⁶⁹

Letters, diaries, and military histories fail to record whether the spectacle of soldiers from other states suffering similar deprivations comforted the Vermont boys. Certainly they had much company in suffering. Wisconsin soldiers, for example, told of a parade at Kalorama Heights in Washington that President Lincoln and Secretary of State Seward attended. Ladies were also present, observing the parade in carriages their drivers had parked behind the regiments. The soldiers' uniforms on this occasion according to one chagrined wearer were "botched up affairs gotten up by Wisconsin tailors to swindle the state." These uniforms did not endure the rigors of soldiering and exposed the backsides of the men wearing them, a condition causing "the ladies to blush furiously [before being] . . . driven to the front."⁷⁰ The clothing of some soldiers became such an embarrassment they could not even participate in the ceremony celebrating the completion of Fort Mott, a ceremony that General McClellan and President Lincoln both attended. Soldiers who, ironically, had helped build the fort had to "slink back behind the parapet" because of their rags.⁷¹ As late as January, soldiers from New England wrote home requesting socks, shoes, and hospital stores. "Too much cannot be done for our regiments at home; there is a great laxity on the part of the government in furnishing uniforms, shoes and stockings; the latter are of very poor quality, and not fit to be distributed."⁷²

Speculators and their contacts in the army—human scavengers preying on the misfortunes of the volunteers—took advantage of the "great laxity." Of these men who in winter held back blankets for higher prices or who accepted bribes for purchasing inferior equipment, one soldier wrote: "I wish the parties who made the purchase of these articles had to sleep in



Camp of 2nd Vermont Volunteers, Camp Griffin, Virginia.

them, for they were condemned when the purchase was made, and had been rejected by some other regiment. Thus our brave soldiers must suffer for one or two men who were paid for receiving a poor quality of tent."⁷³

In addition to suffering caused by heavy fatigue, exposure, shabby clothes and tents, these men also suffered because of command inertia on the question of winter quarters. Where would these men go into winter quarters? At Camps Griffin and Pierpont? The soldiers' officers knew nothing. One questioned "why are we not ordered to winter quarters? There seems to me to be great recklessness of the soldiers' health and comfort in this army. There is wrong somewhere."⁷⁴ Even the Surgeon-General had no knowledge concerning this important decision. Since his responsibilities included recommending the kind of winter quarters the men should construct, his ignorance meant that he did not make his recommendations until mid-January. By then many soldiers had excavated pits in the ground with tents covering them, shelters Tripler "condemned emphatically . . . as being totally inadmissible" since they could not be "kept dry or well-ventillated and certainly would not be kept in good police."⁷⁵

Although officers at the brigade and regimental level had no control over the decision of where the army would spend the winter, they did

have authority to control the policing or cleaning of camps once the command made the decision to remain at Camps Griffin and Pierpont. In exercising this authority they would have gone far in diminishing the existence of diarrhea, typhoid, and malaria—diseases which breed in inadequate hygienic conditions. But these officers had little knowledge of, or worse, displayed official indifference to the value of disposing of sewage, garbage, animal offal and manure, controlling insects and rodents, or protecting water and food. Surgeon-General Tripler inspected camps in Smith's Division at Camp Griffin in December, 1861, and found little to commend. Sloppy policing prevailed in the camps of the Sixth Maine, Second Vermont, Forty-ninth New York, and Cameron Dragoons. Some camps displayed so little attention to proper field sanitation that sinks or latrines extended into the camp streets.⁷⁶ On subsequent inspections the Surgeon-General found little improvement. One month after the Surgeon-General's December visit, a field officer reported that in the camp of the Fifth Wisconsin "large piles of garbage" stood between the tents. Why? A Wisconsin officer explained that "teams had not been supplied for nearly two weeks for Police purposes."⁷⁷ Insect vectors of disease—especially flies—thrived under these conditions.

Pure water for the camps presented two problems. One problem stemmed from a lack of appreciation of its importance. When well-water was scarce, as it was at Camp Griffin,⁷⁸ it meant trouble because most regiments turned to brooks to supply their needs. The same brook served many purposes—the needs of bathers, cooks, drinkers, mules, horses, flies, and mosquitoes. The Fourth Vermont used a brook which drained surface water from a slope on which hundreds of horses stood.⁷⁹ Both dysentery and typhoid fever flourished in the fecal contamination of food and water supplies. Another water problem resulted when army traffic and other activities disrupted the poor natural drainage systems in the clay soil of northern Virginia and created mosquito breeding sites.⁸⁰ The standing pools did more than attract unwelcome insects. As the bite of the widely prevalent anopheline mosquito caused malaria, the prevalence of breeding sites for it imperiled the health of the entire army.⁸¹

Ignorance and indifference and the rigors of camp life put thousands of soldiers in the hospital, and these facilities varied greatly. Some regimental surgeons treated the sick in tents or log huts. In other cases, they pressed into service homes in the area as hospitals. In September when the Wisconsin and New England boys crossed into Virginia and established Camp Advance, John Waggamon, a farmer whose property lay a short distance west of Chain Bridge on the north side of the turnpike, saw his home used first as General Smith's division headquarters; and the next month, when the army advanced to Lewinsville, Waggamon's former

home became a hospital.⁸² In October surgeons in Hancock's Brigade and later the Vermont Brigade took charge of the stone house belonging to John Johnson (the house now known as Benvenue).⁸³ With the large number of sick in the Forty-ninth Pennsylvania (Hancock's Brigade) and in the Vermont Brigade few hospitals carried the load this one did.

The quality of care the sick received also varied. Alfred Castleman of Milwaukee, surgeon of the Fifth Wisconsin, ran a first-rate hospital, which one medical inspector used as a standard in judging the adequacy of other hospitals.⁸⁴ Unlike many of his counterparts, Castleman recognized the connection between cleanliness and health. He insisted on a clean, well-supplied hospital and a well-policed camp and reacted with intense vexation when the ignorance or indifference of others frustrated these aims. He felt no compunction about sharing the burdens of a sensitive, humane conscience with his commanding officer. In one October 30, 1861, letter, for example, he complained to Winfield Scott Hancock about the Quartermaster's delay in providing straw for the hospital where the sick in his care were lying on the ground for want of it.⁸⁵ At Camp Curtin and later at Benvenue and then in a tent hospital nearer Lewinsville, Castleman as a physician and as a human being won "golden opinions from the sick men . . . who fell under his charge. . . . He is as tender and gentle with the sick men," wrote one Wisconsin admirer, "as if they were his own children."⁸⁶

Castleman ran one kind of hospital; on the other extreme were hospitals like the one serving the Sixth Maine where the dead lay in passageways between hospital wards all day,⁸⁷ or like the one serving the Forty-ninth Pennsylvania, which reminded one observer of "a dungeon for vicious pigs." The report on this disgraceful place continued that "The Surgeon has been off duty for sometime—having been sick. These men have no beds—no straw—no comfort—no cleanliness. . . . One room I found full of smoke—so dense as to bring water to my eyes. . . . I do not hesitate to say that this hole would make a well man sick."⁸⁸

In defending this hospital from the "ungenerous statements" in the previous report, an officer of the Forty-ninth Pennsylvania revealed inadvertently other deficiencies. He was particularly offended by the charge that the hospital kitchen was dirty, and explained that "The attendants on 46 patients passing back and forth for three daily meals . . . through ankle deep mud of a common thoroughfare at this season, could not fail to make it so. . . ."⁸⁹

Those, then, who recognized the connection between filth and disease and managed to succeed in enforcing sanitary regulations saw encouraging if not permanently salutary results. At Camp Griffin the soldiers under Castleman's care provided the most dramatic example, but other regiments

also recorded improvement. When the Third Vermont, for example, moved from Camp Advance to Camp Griffin, the health of the regiment temporarily improved. One observer thought this came from camping in a "more wholesome" area.⁹⁰ Moving the camp of the Fourth Vermont to higher ground in mid-December, 1861, probably accounted for the extraordinary reduction in the number of sick in the hospital. On December 13, before the move, 360 Vermonters lay sick. After the move that number dropped to 60.⁹¹ Tripler wrote that the improvement in these Vermont regiments showed how camping grounds "long occupied get saturated with putrescent exhalation. . . . A change of ground will often be found to arrest or diminish an endemic for a while until a new saturation of the new soil sets it in motion again. This was exemplified in Brooks' brigade. A change of camp seemed to have checked the endemic in one of his worst regiments. Gradually, however, it reappeared."⁹²

This ceaseless reappearance of disease baffled and discouraged army surgeons. Despite their best intentions and most heroic efforts, epidemics reappeared and their patients suffered repeated attacks. Castleman could insist on non-interference in his effort to maintain cleanliness and consultations with physicians before laying out camps; Tripler could recommend the kind of shelter most amenable to ventilating and policing; Tripler could recommend that hot coffee be issued after reveille and that quinine be administered to combat malaria. Wholesome locations, good policing, adequate clothing and shelter, and dubious treatments—all of these might contribute to a temporary halt in the incidence of sickness. After a "temporary" improvement the diseases always returned. The Civil War physicians knew nothing about the existence of pathogenic microbes. "The concept of living, subdivisible, self-multiplying invasive organisms as the cause of disease had not yet been accepted." Under these circumstances conscientious medical directors relied chiefly on field sanitation and hygiene for protection which in the long run proved ineffective because they were "based on physical and chemical concepts of cleanliness rather than on microbiological ones. Contamination could occur under subdivisible conditions, and dilution did not eliminate infection."⁹³

For four years at places like the Peninsula, South Mountain, Antietam, and Gettysburg the Vermont Brigade accepted staggering casualty rates. Altogether the Brigade experienced a casualty rate of thirty-eight percent. The Fourth Vermont, which suffered a thirty-four percent casualty rate, saw more of its men die of disease than in combat. The other regiments in the brigade had only slightly higher deaths from combat. Paradoxically, on the battlefield the odds of surviving against Confederates were often better than surviving in camp against the pathogens. On the battlefield a soldier could see his enemy; his arms and comrades and



Soldier's burial, Camp Griffin, Virginia.

officers helped him in his fight. He had support from artillery and cavalry; army intelligence revealed the enemy's position and strength. Against his other enemy, the pathogens, he had none of these advantages, and when through ignorance and inertia and indifference his officers conspired with the pathogens, he suffered tremendously.

In 1865 Wilbur Fisk, the soldier who three years earlier abided the loneliness and discomfort of a Lewinsville picket line to help protect the Union from "treason's usurpations," went home to Vermont. At home he reflected on his years of service and wondered how he would answer those who asked "how it seemed" to be a free citizen again. "I should say it seemed as if I had been through a long dark tunnel," he wrote, "and had just got into daylight once more." His metaphor helped to describe the hardships of the campaigns of the Peninsula, of Maryland, of the Wilderness, and the Shenandoah Valley. It also helped to describe Benvenue, Salona, Lewinsville, and Langley. The darkness began there.

NOTES

¹ Records of the United States Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920, Letters Received, October, 1861, First Brigade, Smith's Division, Camp Griffin, Va., Record Group 393, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Hereafter cited as Letters, Camp Griffin.

² Letter from Wilbur Fisk, *Green Mountain Freeman* [Montpelier], March 4, 1862, p. 1. Fisk, from Tunbridge, enlisted on September 5, 1861, and was mustered in as a private in Company E of the Second Regiment two days later. He re-enlisted on December 21, 1863, and on July 1, 1865, he was promoted to quartermaster sergeant. His service ended with his discharge at Burlington on July 15, 1865. He apparently left Vermont as did so many of his brothers in arms. No record of his grave exists in the registration file of veterans compiled by the WPA and housed in the Library of the Vermont Historical Society, Montpelier, Vermont. See also Theodore S. Peck, Adjutant-General, *Revised Roster of Vermont Volunteers and Lists of Volunteers Who Served in the Army and Navy of the United States During the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1866* (Montpelier: Watchman Publishing Co., 1892), pp. 31, 47. Richard E. Winslow of Penn State University wrote that Fisk's letters which appeared in the *Green Mountain Freeman* were undoubtedly the finest of this type" he had seen in his Civil War research. These letters, Winslow continued, were "written with insight, humor and intelligence, and provide "a most human and accurate description of battles, camp life, rumors. . . ." See Charles T. Morrissey, *Vermont, A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981), pp. 202-03; and Vermont Historical Society, *News and Notes*, Vol. 22, No. 6, March-April, 1970.

³ Letter from Second Wisconsin, *Milwaukee Morning Sentinel*, September 23, 1861, p. 1.

⁴ E.V. Woodward, *Our Campaigns; or, the Marches, Bivouacs, Battles, Incidents of Camp Life and History of our Regiment During Its Three Terms of Service* (Philadelphia: John E. Potter, 1865), p. 65.

⁵ George Grenville Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War. A History of the Part Taken by the Vermont Soldiers and Sailors in the War for the Union, 1861-5* (Burlington: The Free Press Association, 1889), I, pp. 91-92.

⁶ Charles Amory Clark, *Campaigning With the Sixth Maine* (Des Moines: The Kenyon Press, 1897), p. 9.

⁷ George Meade, *Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), I, p. 227.

⁸ Brooks' full name was W.T. Brooks. Before his assignment to the Vermont Brigade, he served on General McClellan's staff. Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, I, p. 236.

⁹ This was General Isaac Stevens, one-time Governor of Washington Territory and later member of the House of Representatives. He was killed at Chantilly in 1862. Mark Boatner, *The Civil War Dictionary* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1959), pp. 796-97. In January, 1862, Brigadier General John Davidson, a Fairfax County native, took command of Stevens' Brigade. Frederick D. Bidwell, *History of the Forty-ninth New York Volunteers* (Albany: J.B. Lyon Co., 1916), p. 140.

¹⁰ E.B. Quiner, *The Military History of Wisconsin: A Record of the Civil and Military Patriotism of the State, In the War for the Union* (Chicago: Clarke and Co., Publishers, 1886), p. 509.

¹¹ Silas Casey was best known for his three-volume *Infantry Tactics, for the Instruction, Exercise, and Manoeuvres of the Soldier, A Company, Line of Skirmishes, Battalions, Brigade, or Corps d'Armee* (New York, Van Nostrand, 1862 and 1865). Boatner, *Civil War Dictionary*, p. 131.

¹² Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, I, p. 183.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

¹⁴ William Thompson Lusk, *War Letters* (New York: Privately Printed, 1911), p. 68.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87; and William Todd, *The Seventy-ninth Highlanders: New York Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865* (Albany: Press of Brandow, Barton and Co., 1886), pp. 84-85.

¹⁶ Alfred Lewis Castleman, *The Army of the Potomac* (Milwaukee: Strickland and Co., 1863), p. 41; and Xerox copy of "Poll taken at Lewinsville, Fairfax County, Va. . . . upon the ratification or rejection of 'An Ordinance to repeal the ratification of the Constitution . . . by the State of Virginia" The original copy of this vote is in the Clerk's office of the Fairfax Court House.

¹⁷ Camp Griffin was named after Charles Griffin, commander of Griffin's Light Battery in the fall of 1861. Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, I, p. 96.

¹⁸ From the diary of I.M. Sowers, Company A, Ninth Pennsylvania Reserves, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Camp Pierpont bore the name of the loyal governor of Virginia, Francis Harrison Pierpont, see Woodward, *Our Campaigns*, pp. 65-66.

¹⁹ Letter of John Hamilton to his cousin Boyd, August 30, 1861, in the John Hamilton and William Hamilton Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division.

²⁰ Castleman, *Army of the Potomac*, p. 83 and 79.

²¹ Letter of Wilbur Fisk, *Green Mountain Freeman*, March 20, 1862.

²² Todd, *The Seventy-Ninth Highlanders*, p. 88.

²³ Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, I, 62, no less than "751, or forty percent" killed and wounded in action; and *Revised Roster of Vermont Volunteers*, p. 66. Hereafter cited as *Revised Roster of Vermont Volunteers*.

²⁴ *Revised Roster of Vermont Volunteers*, pp. 105, 141, and 176; and Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, I, 234.

²⁵ Paul E. Steiner, *Disease in the Civil War Natural Biological Warfare in 1861-1865* (Springfield: C.C. Thomas, 1968), p. vii.

- 26 *Revised Roster of Vermont Volunteers*, p. 141.
- 27 Steiner, *Disease in the Civil War*, p. vii.
- 28 Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, I, pp. 127 and 158.
- 29 United States Department of War, *War of Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901, V, 108. Hereafter cited as *O.R.*
- 30 Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, I, pp. 160-61.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 237.
- 32 *O.R.*, Series I, V, 92.
- 33 Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, I, p. 237.
- 34 *O.R.*, Series I, V, 717.
- 35 Castleman, *Army of the Potomac*, p. 74.
- 36 *O.R.*, Series I, V, 716.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 101 and 716.
- 38 Steiner, *Disease in the Civil War*, p. 12.
- 39 Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, I, p. 127.
- 40 Castleman, *Army of the Potomac*, p. 5.
- 41 Steiner, *Disease in the Civil War*, pp. 13-14.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 10; and Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, I, 237-38.
- 43 Steiner, *Disease in the Civil War*, 16, 18.
- 44 *O.R.*, Series I, V, 112.
- 45 Records of the United States Continental Commands, 1821-1920, Letters Sent, October 24, 1861, McCall's Division, Camp Pierpont, Va., Record Group 393, National Archives. Hereafter cited as Letters, October 24, 1862, Camp Pierpont.
- 46 Steiner, *Disease in the Civil War*, p. 20-21.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 48 Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, I, p. 161.
- 49 Steiner, *Disease in the Civil War*, p. 10.
- 50 Steiner, *Medical-Military Portraits of Union and Confederate Generals* (Philadelphia: Whitmore Publishing Co., 1968), p. 13.
- 51 Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, I, p. 211.
- 52 Robert S. Westbrook, *History of the 49th Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Altoona, Pennsylvania, 1898), p. 95. King James Version of the Bible.
- 53 Castleman, *Army of the Potomac*, p. 30.
- 54 Letter from Camp Advance, *Milwaukee Morning Sentinel*, September 24, 1861, p. 2.
- 55 *O.R.*, Series I, V, 110.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 83 and 110.
- 57 Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, I, pp. 239-240.
- 58 Castleman, *Army of the Potomac*, p. 5.
- 59 Steiner, *Disease in the Civil War*, p. 20.
- 60 Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, I, p. 183.
- 61 *Milwaukee Morning Sentinel*, September 9, 1861, p. 2.
- 62 Clark, *Sixth Maine*, p. 9.
- 63 Letter from "C" of the Second Wisconsin, *Milwaukee Morning Sentinel*, October 14, 1861, p. 2.
- 64 *Ibid.*, September 23, 1861, 1.
- 65 *Ibid.*, September 9, 1861, 2.
- 66 Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, I, p. 160.
- 67 *Green Mountain Freeman*, November 4, 1861, p. 4.
- 68 Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, I, p. 136.
- 69 *Ibid.*, I, 95.
- 70 *Milwaukee Morning Sentinel*, September 11, 1861, p. 1.
- 71 *Ibid.*, September 9, 1861, p. 2.
- 72 *Portland Daily Advertiser*, January 21, 1861, p. 2.
- 73 *Milwaukee Morning Sentinel*, March 6, 1862, p. 2.
- 74 Castleman, *Army of the Potomac*, p. 79.
- 75 *O.R.*, Series I, V, pp. 108-09 and 84.
- 76 Letters, December 19, 1861, Camp Griffin.
- 77 Records of the United States Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920, Reports Received, January 17, 1862, Brooks Brigade, Smith's Division, Camp Griffin, Va., Record Group 393. Hereafter cited as Reports.
- 78 Letters, October 16, 1861, Camp Griffin.
- 79 Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, I, p. 160.
- 80 *O.R.*, Series I, V, pp. 108.

- 81 Steiner, *Disease in the Civil War*, p. 14.
- 82 Testimony of John Waggamon before the Commissioners of Claims, Washington, May 20, 1871, in his own case. Commissioners of Claims, Number 1278, General Accounting Office files, Record Group 217, National Archives.
- 83 Castleman, *Army of the Potomac*, pp. 41-2.
- 84 Reports, January 17, 1862, Camp Griffin.
- 85 Letters, October 30, 1861, Camp Griffin. For an analysis of the growth in the acceptance of the relationship between cleanliness and the incidence of sickness in nineteenth century America, see Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
- 86 *The Daily Wisconsin*, October 26, 1861, p. 2.
- 87 Letters, October 31, 1861, Camp Griffin.
- 88 Reports, January 17, 1862, Camp Griffin.
- 89 Letters, February 13, 1862, Camp Griffin.
- 90 Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, I, 136.
- 91 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 92 *O.R.*, Series I, V, 109.
- 93 Steiner, *Disease in the Civil War*, pp. 4-5.