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THE VERMONT GENERAL

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A review article

THE centennial of the Civil War will be commemorated in 1961 by widespread federal and state celebrations. They will be based on the theme that a Union once precariously threatened and almost torn asunder was, in a long and tragic blood bath, welded together again, we trust, forever. It is good that we should pause, upon this hundredth anniversary, and attempt an understanding of the attitudes and feelings of the men who took part in this conflict between the states.

Vermont of course ought to be in the proud vanguard of this procession. Every Vermonter ought to know, or would know if our schools had sense enough to teach a good course in Vermont history, that, in proportion population, more Vermont sons serving in the Union forces fell in battle to the cause of one nation, indivisible, than of any other northern state.^{1a} Also, out of a population of 315,098, a hundred years ago this year, one out of every ten residents of Vermont served in Vermont regiments. To feel more intimately the impact of this fact, one has only to visit some of our small villages and count the many, many names on the Civil War monuments standing, now forgotten, upon the village greens.

A noble record!

How can we, today, removed one hundred years from the event, understand and appreciate what these men did? Apart from reading again the formal histories and books on this war, one of the best ways to make the facts come home to us, is to read individual accounts of Vermont soldiers, of which, by the way, there are not many. Fortunately, however, there was published on Lincoln's Birthday, a new book, *Vermont General*. While this charming volume does not, it is true, make a marked contribution of new facts to the formal history of this war, it certainly does contribute greatly to our understanding of the human side of the war, both from the viewpoint of the men engaged, and the folks back home.¹

*Vermont General*² is the story of Edward Hastings Ripley, the

youngest Vermonter, I believe, to become a general officer and doubtless one of the few Americans to achieve this rank at the age of twenty-five years. Warmly told, this story is revealed by some 400 private letters and memoranda, written by General Ripley, and by some hundred letters written to him by his family at Center Rutland. The editor who has a dozen Civil War books to his credit, made the selections from the many letters carefully preserved by Edward's mother and now in the possession of the General's only surviving daughter.³ Those calculated to bear most directly on the meteoric rise of young Ripley and those giving the most interesting news of what was going on in Vermont, were selected for inclusion.

It is not difficult to agree with Dr. Eisenschiml that "the reader will find these war letters quite out of the ordinary. They will not only become rare source material for students of the Civil War, but will be enjoyed by all readers who appreciate high grade literary accomplishment . . ."

Edward Ripley possessed a talent unusual in a soldier; he could write. I confess to being led through this story in one evening by his gift of lucidity and fluency.

The editor wisely prints many letters written to Edward by his family. And a distinguished and interesting family it was. His father, William Young Ripley, started in 1844, with William F. Barnes, the first organized marble business in Rutland County, many years before the present Vermont Marble Company was formed.⁴ His brother, William, the first Vermonter to recruit a volunteer company, was seriously wounded in the battle of Malvern Hill, returned home and in the last year of the war when his wound had healed, was made a Major General of the Vermont Guard. One of his four sisters, Julia Caroline Ripley Dorr was Vermont's most noted female poet who in her Rutland home entertained all the great literary figures of the day.⁵

But the letters that charm one wholly are those written by the young General's mother, who was concerned about the moral tone and often cautioned her son even when he was commanding a regiment near Richmond, to be careful and not fall to the temptation of playing cards! Here in a great brick house at Center Rutland lived this interesting and delightful family.⁶

The editor also offers, between the letters, notes calculated to explain the events dealt with. Perhaps, however, because of his profound knowledge of these events, Dr. Eisenschiml tacitly assumes that the reader knows them too. Unfortunately for the general

reader, the editor has been niggardly in the amount of information set forth and many times while reading the book, I sensed a missed opportunity for the editor to fill in gaps of background data. It is quite natural, I think, that a field officer on duty with troops would not always have had time to fill in many of the important and even exciting facts we want to know. And especially, due to General Ripley's modesty, he would tend to gloss over many of the events dealing with his own accomplishments. I wish the editor had furnished us with a great deal more about this personable young Vermont general and the Ninth Vermont Regiment in which young Edward began his military career as a Captain when he was only twenty-three years old, fresh from Union College.

The Ninth Vermont Infantry was recruited early in the summer of 1862. Young Edward aided greatly in getting volunteers and was elected captain of Company B. Fortunately for all concerned, when the regiment was mustered in later that summer, the command was given to Colonel George J. Stannard, later to become a Major General and lead the glorious action of the Vermonters that turned back the classic charge of Pickett's men at Gettysburg. The Ninth was the first to respond to President Lincoln's new call for immediate enlistments when Washington city was threatened by General Stonewall Jackson. In marching through New York City, where it was enthusiastically cheered, it was the first Union regiment, as the New York papers noted, to pass through that city on its way to the field. On July twenty-five the Vermonters reached Harper's Ferry where, at Camp Sigel nearby, they were kept inactive for five weary weeks.

The first action, and the last for some time as it turned out, came at Harper's Ferry when Lee's army, crossing the Potomac ten miles below, cut off the Union force. Because of the later demonstrated ineptness (and some like Ripley and Stannard thought actual cowardice) of the Union brigade commander, Colonel Miles, Stannard and his eager Vermonters were not allowed to fight their way out of the trap and the entire Union detachment was therefore surrendered to the enemy.⁷

Thus began the unhappy period of the Ninth Regiment's history. Although the Vermonters through no fault of their own had become prisoners of war, they were paroled and sent to Chicago where they remained champing at the bit until March 28, 1863.

While there at Camp Douglas⁸ Colonel Stannard was promoted and transferred out of the Ninth to command the Second Vermont Brigade. This moved all the other officers up. Captain Ripley re-

ceived his first promotion to a majority. In April the regiment was exchanged and posted to Virginia, ready now for real action. In the short time of nine weeks, and it was a matter of wonder to both Edward and his family as the letters show, young Ripley not yet twenty-four years of age, was advanced through the ranks of Major, Lieutenant Colonel and full Colonel in command of his regiment, the Ninth Vermont Infantry.

Here we could, if space permitted, follow the fortunes of Colonel Edward Ripley and his famous Ninth through Suffolk, Yorktown, Morehead City, Beaufort, Newport, New Berne, Chapin's Farm and Fair Oaks; a series of combat actions culminating in the final success of Grant's relentless push to Richmond. One of the most exciting parts of this record is the gallant action by Edward Ripley and his men in the capture of Fort Harrison, September 1864. Here Edward was wounded and General Stannard lost his arm.

Three months after his twenty-fifth birthday, early in the last year of the war, Edward was elevated to the rank of Brevet Brigadier General. He had by this time not only achieved the star for leadership in the field, but his care and training of his command had won for the Ninth Vermont the distinction of being pronounced in orders the best regiment in the entire division. Early in March President Lincoln reviewed the corps. On March 22, Edward Ripley was given the command of the First Brigade of the Third Division, 24th Army Corps.

But no action became the young General more than the last when he led his men into Richmond at the final exhausted gasp of the Confederacy. Here he was placed in full command of the captured city. Extinguishing fires the Confederates had set to destroy the city and laying a firm hand on the looters, General Ripley soon restored order. The newspapers were told what line to take. Even the clergymen were told how to calm the fears of their parishioners. Confidence replaced fear throughout the city and in a very few days the Confederate capital was under firm control of the young general who thought of everything. So wise were his many actions at Richmond in 1865 that he was affectionately dubbed by the Confederate press "The Duke of Richmond." When he visited this place again years after the war he was warmly and enthusiastically received as the saviour of the city.

The highlight of his Richmond tour of duty must have been the day that President Lincoln entered the rebel capital. Informed by a Confederate soldier that there existed a dire plot on Abraham Lin-

coln's life and at that very moment the great President's life was in extreme danger, General Ripley felt it was his bounden duty to pass on this intelligence to Mr. Lincoln. While later events indicate that this Confederate informer had a vivid imagination or even a gift for fiction, the General's account of his interview with Lincoln is interesting. He writes:

The President received me most cordially in the Admiral's cabin, and then sat down on the long cushioned seat running along the side of the ship behind the dining table, I taking my seat opposite him. Little Tad, who was then a small and very restless boy, amused himself by running up and down the length of the sofa behind his father and jumping over his back in passing. As I progressed in my errand, the President let his head droop upon his hands as his elbows rested on the table, his hands supporting his chin and clasping either cheek in an expression of the most heart-breaking weariness. I read the paper; I urged upon him the reasonableness of the warning, the good faith and apparent integrity of the man. I begged him to let me bring him in and talk with him, but it was all to no purpose. Finally, he lifted his head, and said:— 'No, Gen. Ripley, it is impossible for me to adopt and follow your suggestions. I deeply appreciate the feeling which has led you to urge them on me, but I must go on as I have begun in the course marked out for me, for I cannot bring myself to believe that any human being lives who would do me any harm.' The interview then ended. He was so worn, emaciated and pallid that he looked more like a disembodied spirit than the successful leader of a great nation in its hour of supreme triumph. I never saw him again.

The letters of the young General throughout this book are full of surprises and touches of wit. Writing his mother in November, 1864, he says, "You allude to the fearfully 'threatened border'. I think a half dozen one-legged veterans will defend it, and the hue and cry laughable, if it were not so undignified and unworthy of the people of Vermont. There is a deal too much use of the word 'scare' in the Vermont papers. Pennsylvanians have scares. 'Tis not till this generation, and that only among the stay-at-homes, that Vermonters admit themselves scared."⁹

I was also intrigued by bits of curious and perhaps not otherwise recorded Vermont history that leap from the letters written by the General's family. I had always supposed, for example, that New York City was the only place where draft riots occurred because some men were cowards or did not care who won the war. But I find there was one in Rutland, Vermont, too. William, writing his brother from Center Rutland on July 19, 1863, recounts an exciting time they had been having for the last few weeks. He tells Edward:¹⁰

I wrote you about Crane being stoned off the Quarries when he went there to enroll the Irishmen. They made a great breeze at the time. Everybody was indignant and everybody said it was a shame and that the rioters ought to be punished, and everybody damned Crane because he 'did not do something'. But when you asked them 'are you willing to take a musket and go over there and help enforce the law?' . . . they all, like the men in the Bible, made excuses . . . Well Crane got 200 men, the presence of which force developed such a wonderful amount of courage in our town-people that they immediately set to work and formed a Home-Guard . . .

The temptation to go on quoting from these delightful letters is great, but one more excerpt will suffice to illustrate better than words of my own, not only the attitude of Edward Ripley toward the war, but the felicitous manner in which the young general from Vermont could express himself.

With the old cry upon my lips I knew not that at that moment the cruel war was at last over, and that the peace we had so longed and prayed for hovered over us, and that I should never again haunt the flank of a marching column with a heart steeled against all its natural sympathies, and should cry to men, sick in body, sick at heart, lame, foot-sore and exhausted,—'Close up, men! Close up!'

This paper could well end here were it not for a fortuitous event that still gives me the eerie feeling that I must have known General Edward Ripley.

Years ago I had the good fortune to be a guest of General Ripley's daughter at Mendon. She had years before this married the son of the world renowned Professor Raphael Pumpelly, advisor to the Emperor of Japan and author of a noted book of explorations in the Gobi Desert. Mrs. Pumpelly and her three children were then living in a one-story red cottage close to the imposing Ripley mansion, also painted red and for many years a landmark at Mendon.¹¹ It was in this house that General Ripley lived out his life, after coming home in 1865 from the war.

It was in this commodious and what must have been, by mid-century standards, beautiful house that General Ripley held court: I mean no disparagement or ridicule. The tremendous energy and imagination that made Edward a General at twenty-five created for him after the war a dynamic and abundant life full of many new honors and outstanding achievements.

He entered his father's marble business, founded a bank, erected the Holland House, a fine hotel in New York City, constructed the Raritan Railroad in New Jersey by which he shipped horses to Ar-

gentina and found time to serve in the Vermont legislature. The man's personality and contagious spirit drew to him many of the famous people of that day. The Mansion, as it was always known, was the mecca of the distinguished and notable personages of the time.

At Mendon in 1930 I had the good luck to learn all this. Naturally I was moved. I begged my hostess to allow me to stay in the Ripley mansion for a night. At that time it must have been deserted for many years and could well be, I reasoned, full of ghosts of a glorious past. Somehow, I felt I wanted in a way to commune with those ghosts in the rooms where the young general lived his exciting life.

Wandering through the many quiet rooms that evening, with a kerosene lamp in my hand I saw, by this dim illumination, some of the General's furniture still in the shadows. There was very little difficulty in evoking that night, much to my delight, something of the magic of this personality.

On the walls were still hanging a few pictures. Best of all there was one of him probably taken about the year 1900. Out of the small frame, with a clear and distinguished mien, peered one of the most handsome and striking men I had ever beheld. He wore, in the photograph, the twirled mustaches and Imperial of the Civil War period. Of course they had turned white, along with his hair, but it was good to see that he was still "tall, straight, handsome, vigorous, and high spirited," words used many years before by G. G. Benedict to describe the young General.

Of course I never saw General Edward Hastings Ripley. He died in 1915. But communing with the ghosts in his own house, I felt then as I feel today, very close to him.

I could say then in 1930 as I studied his photograph as I can well say even more surely now, as I finish reading *Vermont General*, that here was an ideal Civil War officer. Gallant and dashing, young and personable, audacious and unafraid, Edward Ripley was the very epitome and wonderful symbol of the men who left their Green Mountain homes to put the Union back together again.

Looking at this photograph now, and thinking of how it was thirty years ago in Mendon in the twilight shadows of that house, I remember saying to myself, if this man had not been a Civil War general, he certainly ought to have been.

It is good that now, more people can see the young general through this book of letters.

Vermont ought never to forget men like this. Had it not been for

their bravery and sacrifice, their courage and devotion, we of 1961, might be marking the 100th anniversary of quite another event.

NOTES

^{1a}The *Final Report of the Provost Marshal General* in 1866, reveals an even greater distinction for the Green Mountain boys of 100 years ago. This record shows that the national average of casualties per 1000 men (of the loyal states) was 314. Vermont was 492, the highest of all the states furnishing troops to the Union!

¹ What Vermonters at home were thinking and doing during the Civil War was the theme selected by the historian Bernard de Voto for a new book. He was in Vermont doing research and talked to me at length about the book. Unfortunately he died in October of that year before he began writing this story.

² *Vermont General: The Unusual War Experiences of Edward Hastings Ripley*, (1862-1865) Edited by Otto Eisenschiml. 8 vo. 340 pp. Illus. Devin-Adair, N. Y. \$6.00.

³ Sibyl Huntington Ripley, who contributes a foreword to the book. Representations are now being made to her to present this magnificent collection of original letters to the Vermont Historical Society where they may be safe and also available in the future to scholars.

⁴ The complete story of the beginning of the marble business, both in Bennington and Rutland counties should be written.

⁵ Julia Dorr's house where Longfellow, Emerson, Whittier, Holmes and many others were entertained, is still standing on Otter Creek Road in Rutland but much altered.

⁶ This house, now without its wings and porches, is still intact and may be seen on the north side of West street, on U. S. 4, east of the road to Proctor.

⁷ General Ripley later wrote in a nine page article covering this event, which was included by G. G. Benedict in his definitive history, *Vermont in the Civil War*, "We were doomed so long as Miles lived. Had he been killed by the first shell instead of the last, we should have been saved." Both Benedict and Eisenschiml quote from General Ripley's writings, referring to them as Memoranda. These accounts were classics and I wonder what has become of them in toto. Perhaps here is a book on the war by Ripley himself.

⁸ Named for another great Vermonter, Stephen Douglas, born in Brandon.

⁹ General Ripley was referring to the St. Albans Raid.

¹⁰ The marble quarries at West Rutland.

¹¹ Unfortunately for Vermont, there was no one in Rutland in 1959 able to keep the Vermont Highway Department from demolishing this historic house and building a new highway through the very spot where it stood.