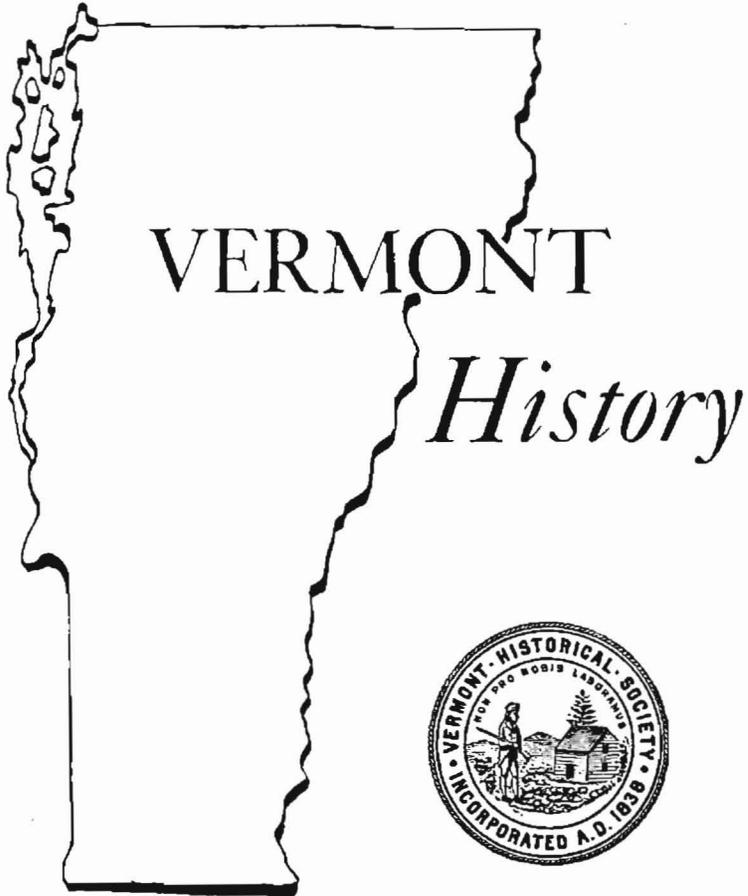
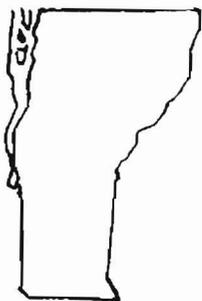


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“. . . the 3rd Vermont has become a name
to swear by.”

“The 3rd Vermont *has won a name:*”
Corporal George Q. French’s Account of the Battle
of Lee’s Mills, Virginia

By ALBERT C. EISENBERG

The fight at Lee’s Mills, Virginia, on April 16, 1861, does not rank with Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Chickamauga, or other major battles of the Civil War. But what it lacked in size, Lee’s Mills more than made up in fury. The opening engagement of General George B. McClellan’s Peninsula Campaign, the fight became one of the most vicious little actions of the whole eastern theatre of the war. Lee’s Mills saw the Union Army of the Potomac attack an entrenched line for the first time. It also represented the first test of arms for the Vermont Brigade, which ultimately earned the distinction of suffering more men killed and mortally wounded during its service than any other federal brigade.¹

Over the two-day period following the fight, a member of the Vermont Brigade, Corporal George Q. French, Company E, 3rd Vermont Volunteer Infantry, found a few free moments to write a spirited account of the fight to some friends back home. French’s letter provides a remarkably detailed version, rich in its portrayal of the sights and sounds of war. Although he reveals himself fully impressed with the horror and the agony of combat, he also makes it clear that he would not have missed the experience.

French typified the thousands of young men and boys who rallied to the Union banner in the weeks after the firing on Fort Sumter, doubtless drawn to enlist by visions of adventure and glory and the patriotic fervor which swept the North. French was born in Cambridge, Vermont, on June 1, 1838, the elder of two sons born to Mark and Mary French. A work-related injury forced French’s father to abandon

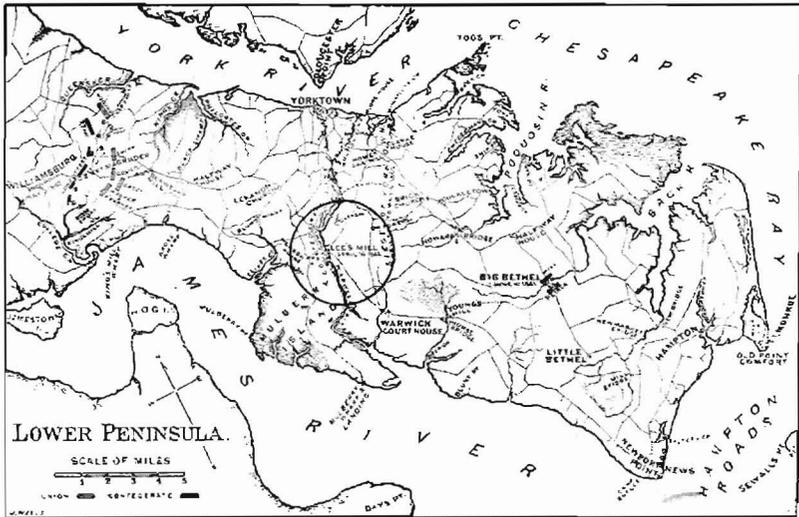
farming, and young George became the family's principal breadwinner. During 1859 the young man worked in nearby salt and lime mines, and from December, 1860, to March, 1861, he drove teams, turning over most of his wages to his parents.²

On his twenty-third birthday, June 1, 1861, French enlisted in the 3rd Vermont Infantry at Johnson, Vermont, with the rank of Private, and on June 16, 1861, he was formally mustered into the United States service as Corporal, to serve for three years or the duration of the war, whichever came first.³ After a few weeks in camp, French and his regiment left Vermont for Washington, D.C. Upon their arrival in Washington on July 24, 1861, the regiment moved to Chain Bridge which spanned the Potomac above the city. The Vermonters' first duties there entailed guarding the approaches to Washington, as well as helping to construct Ft. Ethan Allen, located on the Virginia side of the Potomac in the northwest corner of the capital's defenses. Until March, 1862, the 3rd Vermont repeated a dull routine of drill, picket duty, and scouts into the Virginia countryside. Two major events helped to break the monotony of this routine - the regiment's first action at a skirmish at Lewinsville, Virginia, on September 11, 1861, when it lost several men killed and wounded while returning from a reconnaissance, and the formal organization of the Vermont Brigade, the first such unit composed of regiments from the same state.⁴

With the coming of spring, 1862, the Army of the Potomac began to stir in preparation for General McClellan's proposed advance on Richmond through the Virginia Peninsula. On March 10 the Vermonters broke their winter camp and undertook a hard march to Alexandria, Virginia, in a cold, driving rainstorm. Two weeks later French and his comrades boarded transports to head down the Potomac and then the Chesapeake Bay to Fort Monroe, Virginia, at the entrance to Hampton Roads. On March 25, 1862, they marched into camp near Newport News a few miles from Fort Monroe.⁵

On April 4, 1862, the Union camps in the vicinity of Fort Monroe began to empty as McClellan launched his drive toward the Confederate capital. Within hours, however, the Union forces bogged down as they bumped up against the Confederate defenses strung out along the Warwick River, which cut across the peninsula from Yorktown on the north to the James River on the south. The 3rd Vermont, part of the Union column which arrived at Lee's Mills, on the Warwick River at the lower end of the rebel works some seven miles due south of Yorktown, deployed and awaited further orders. The entrenched rebels, meanwhile, labored to strengthen their positions.⁶

Facing the Vermonters were men from North Carolina, Georgia, and



Louisiana. As the days passed, the two sides maintained a continual exchange of gunshots and insults along the river's banks. At about three o'clock in the afternoon of Wednesday, April 16, 1862, four companies of the 3rd Vermont, backed up by artillery and the rest of the Vermont Brigade, splashed across the Warwick River at a point just below where the enemy had constructed one of several dams. Before the Confederates finally drove them out, the four companies had lost forty-three percent of their members.⁷ Writing over the next two days, Corporal French set forth his colorful and accurate description of the Vermont Brigade's first battle.

Camp near Yorktown Apr. 17th

Dear Friends;

Once more I am permitted to write you a few lines:

The 3rd Vermont *has won a name*, but Oh! at what a cost. We *fought and won* but were finally driven from our hard earned position by overpowering numbers.

I cannot give you particulars—I am unhurt—I think the 5th was not brought into action.⁸ The last time I saw James his hand was doing well. I do not think it will injure him permanently.⁹ Johnny Backum is badly wounded.¹⁰

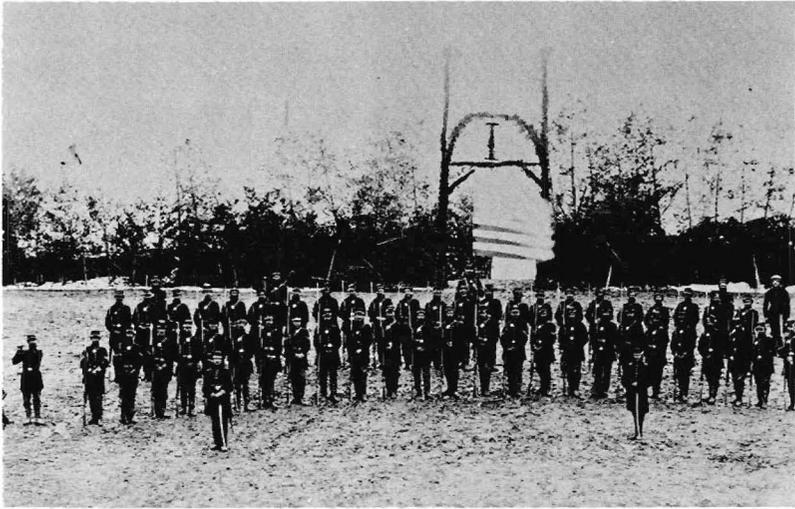
Good Bye George

Friday 18th P.M. Not having had an opportunity to send this to the office, I take this chance of writing further of our welfare. As you are well aware, we are lying in front of the enemy's lines between Yorktown & the James River. Monday an order came from Genl McClellan to have no more firing drumming or loud noise of any kind in camp or along our lines. On Tuesday evening another order came to be ready to march in the morning without overcoats or knapsacks. Our whole Division¹¹ moved in the morning, the 3rd taking position in the woods to the left of Motts Battery¹² to act as its support. About 8 o'clock the Battery opened a brisk fire upon a formidable rebel earthwork mounting three heavy "seige guns."¹³ This fire was kept up almost without cessation for two hours after which it was continued at intervals until about 3 o'clock P.M.

Meantime two companies on the right of our Regt. including about twenty of Co. E—it being a larger company than the Regt. will average— & four companies from the left had been deployed as skirmishers a few rods in front of where the rest of us were laying—quietly sleeping in the warm sun— & were briskly exchanging shots with the rebel pickets on the other side of the creek.

Look at us for a moment there. A little band of less than two hundred men—the Battery on the right, the pickets just in front, & beyond the rebel works, supported by heavy forces.¹⁴ The incessant crackling of the rifles, the booming of cannon & bursting of shells sounded continually in our ears. Now & then a picket would fall & be carried to the rear dead or wounded. In the face of all this we laid from early morning till 3 or 4 P.M. unable to send a helping hand—quietly waiting for our turn to come. Here let me say that this creek is the great hindrance to storming the rebel works—the second Manassas, before which the Grand Army of the Potomac stands a second time at bay. But now Capt. Reed¹⁵ of Gen. Brooks'¹⁶ staff rides up to us & engages in conversation with the commanding officer of the detachment. Hark! I hear him say "They are leaving their works"— & the words "Charge"—"plant a flag"—"shout"—etc. fall indistinctly on my ear. *Rouse up boys: our time has come at last.* Quietly but quickly we divested ourselves of all superfluous clothing—blankets, haversacks & canteens were left behind— & fell into line. "Forward *march*"; & we moved down the slope in line of battle, past the pickets who were to support our advance through the creek—down to the waters edge, when the bullets began to whistle around us.

Before us was the creek—twenty, some say forty rods in width— & just on the other shore a dense woods filled with rifle pits & rebels without number.¹⁷ Into the water we plunged, fixing our bayonets & capping our



Company 1, 6th Vermont Infantry. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

pieces as we went. On we pushed, climbing over logs, roots & every kind of impediment which floated in the water or rested on the ground, firing as we had opportunity, until the channel of the creek was past, & the depth of water began to diminish. Then the gleam of our steadily advancing bayonets began to strike a terror to the rebel hearts & one by one they leaped from behind their breastworks & took cover in the thickets behind. Now commenced a scene which beggars all description. Firmly grasping our trusty rifles we rushed on, shouting, firing, yelling— & ere we set foot on dry land every rebel had left the pits in front of us. I cannot tell you what followed. It makes my heart sick to think of it. Let it suffice to say we held them there at bay for a *long hour*, waiting, Oh how anxiously for reinforcements. The ground was dotted with our comrades dead, & the creek was crimson with the blood of our wounded.

At last when all hope of succor failed & a long line of rebels were seen coming in on the *double quick*, sufficient to annihilate us at a single blow, a few bold hearts made a desperate dash over the breastwork & back into the thicket *fairly cowing* the men in the very face of succor. Then we fell back into the creek & retreated with all due haste.

As we waded back, weary & sick at heart the water fairly boiled around us for bullets. The time had passed when by a proper support of our little band, a *glorious victory* might have been gained; but the "3rd Vermont" has become *a name to swear by*. Genl Smith holds it



*Brigadier-General Howell
Cobb, CSA. Courtesy of the
Library of Congress.*

more sacred today than that of the Diety.¹⁸ Of 192 men who went down into the creek 88 were killed, wounded, or missing.¹⁹ And then they tried to send the 6th into the same trap, but they could not gain the other shore. They too were badly cut up.²⁰ The 5th were not engaged except as skirmishers. The boys are both well today. J. Backum was shot through the left shoulder, breaking his collarbone & touching the upper part of his lung. He stands a chance to recover, but it is small.

He is the only wounded one you know save Sergt. Holmes²¹ who got a ball in the edge of his left ear—*just enough to mark him*. I have not time or room to write more—save that the boys keep up good courage & long for another chance.

Let me hear from you soon George

Last night [Thursday] the enemy came out [unintelligible] to drive off a party who were throwing up breastworks; but were repulsed with some slaughter.

From Lee's Mills, French and the 3rd Vermont went on to fight at Williamsburg, on May 5, 1862, and in the Seven Days' Battles before Richmond at the end of the next month. In early July, at the conclusion of the Peninsula Campaign, French contracted a severe cough and diar-

Brigadier-General W. H. Brooks, USA. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.



rhea as a result of the constant exposure and hard service. His condition eventually deteriorated into chronic diarrhea. So debilitated by the end of the summer that he could no longer keep up with his outfit, French was placed in an ambulance train on September 12, 1862, and three days afterward, he entered the general hospital at Fort McHenry, Baltimore, Maryland.

A letter from French, dated October 4, 1862, found in pension records, reveals that he was still ill, but in good spirits. A month later, on November 3, French signed a document permitting seven dollars in extra bounty payments from the State of Vermont to be deducted from his pay each month and sent to his father. He signed his name in an obviously weak hand. A Mr. A.M. Smith, who visited French that day and the day before, wrote to French's parents that "your son is very weak and really I cannot encourage you to think he will get better." Smith went on to note that the doctors as well could offer no hope for recovery. His prediction proved accurate, for at 10:30 A.M. on November 4, 1862, French died, a victim of "chronic diarrhea and general debility."²²

NOTES

¹ The Vermont Brigade, consisting of the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th Vermont Infantry Regiments, suffered 1128 men killed and mortally wounded of 11,137 original members and recruits. G.G. Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War* (2 vols.; Burlington, Vermont: The Free Press Association, 1886), I, 617.

² Pension Records of Mark French, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Application numbers 216.613 and 809.554. and certification numbers 174.323 and 206.618.

³ Service Records of Corporal George Q. French, 3rd Vermont Infantry, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁴ Federal policy discouraged the formation of brigades from regiments from the same state in order to foster rivalry among individual regiments, and to prevent the weight of casualties in any one brigade from falling too heavily on the troops of any one state. Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, 1, 235.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 129-37.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 245-66. Report of Colonel Breed N. Hyde, commanding the 3rd Vermont, April 17, 1862. *The War of the Rebellion. A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, vol. 11, Part 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1884), p. 375. Hereafter referred to as *O.R.*

⁸ Except for about seventy men detailed as sharpshooters, the 5th Vermont was not actively engaged in the fight. Report of Colonel Henry A. Smalley, April 17, 1862. *O.R.* p. 377.

⁹ The records do not permit identification of this individual.

¹⁰ Private John C. Backum of Johnson, Vermont, was discharged for disability on October 31, 1862.

¹¹ 2nd Division, IV Army Corps, Army of the Potomac.

¹² The 3rd New York Battery, commanded by Captain Thaddeus P. Mott.

¹³ According to Brigadier-General Howell Cobb, C.S.A., commanding the rebel forces directly opposite the 3rd Vermont, the guns there consisted of a 6-pound cannon and two 12-pound howitzers. Certainly, none of these would be viewed as siege guns. Captain M. Stanley, C.S.A., of the Troup Artillery, indicated in his report that what Cobb took for two 12-pounders were actually one 12-pounder and a 24-pounder. This last could have been one of the siege guns French claimed he saw. Report of General Cobb, April 22, 1862, *O.R.* p. 417 and Report of Captain Stanley, no date, 1862, *Ibid.*, p. 418.

¹⁴ The Confederate forces at this time of the day consisted of men belonging to the 2nd Louisiana, the 15th North Carolina, and the 11th and 16th Georgia Infantry, plus the Troup Artillery, and Captain Tyler C. Jordan's Battery. Report of General Cobb, *Ibid.*, p. 417.

¹⁵ Captain Theodore Read, Assistant-Adjutant General, 2nd Brigade.

¹⁶ Brigadier-General W. T. H. Brooks, commanding the Vermont Brigade.

¹⁷ R. R. Ihrie, Lieutenant-Colonel of the 15th North Carolina Infantry, wrote in his report that the river was four feet deep and 150-200 yards wide, with "heavy timber and thick undergrowth" at the point of the 3rd Vermont's attack. The Colonel of the 6th Vermont, Nathan Lord, Jr., whose troops attempted to cross the river later that day, noted that the river was twenty rods wide and from two to four feet deep. Report of Lieutenant-Colonel Ihrie, April 19, 1862, *O.R.* p. 422 and Report of Colonel Lord, April 17, 1862, *Ibid.*, p. 378.

¹⁸ Serious confusion existed about just what the 3rd Vermont was supposed to accomplish. The top Union generals—McClellan, Division commander William F. Smith, and General Brooks of the Vermont Brigade—all expected the 3rd to confine its mission to reconnaissance. It was to feel out the enemy and ascertain the nature of his position. It is equally clear that Colonel Hyde of the 3rd Vermont, as well as his men, believed that their task was to capture the enemy's works and to hold them with the aid of reinforcements. Upon capturing the rifle pits, Hyde sent back a messenger to brigade headquarters. Hyde states, and Brooks confirms, that the messenger never reached his destination. The men of the 3rd also signaled their success by waving handkerchiefs and shouting, but Brooks gives no indication that he was aware of these signals. Brooks reports that the 3rd was forced to pull back because its ammunition had become wet in the crossing and because it received no reinforcements. Yet Brooks does not suggest that he ever intended the 3rd to hold onto its captured entrenchments or that he ever intended to send support. Hyde obviously expected additional troops to come to his men's aid in order to help them exploit their gains, and he was bitterly disappointed when none were forthcoming. See the official reports of the Union commanders, *Ibid.*, pp. 363-364, 373, and 375.

¹⁹ The 3rd Vermont lost a total of eighty-three killed, wounded, and missing, according to final records. Other Federal units engaged, including artillery as well as infantry, lost another eighty-two men killed and wounded. Confederate losses are unknown, but probably were no more than half the Union total. List of casualties at Lee's Mills, Virginia, April 16, 1862, *O.R.*, pp. 373 and 378.

²⁰ There was no confusion about the task of the 6th Vermont. About an hour after the return of the 3rd, the 6th Vermont moved to attack the rebel works in an effort to capture them. Four companies of the 4th Vermont were assigned to help their sister regiment by creating a diversion. Rebel gunfire smashed the assault almost as it began. The attack should never have occurred. General Brooks reports that the 3rd Vermont had shown that the River could be crossed, and

that the enemy's works could be taken. It is clear, however, that the time to send in the 6th Vermont was when its comrades in the 3rd had made their gains, not an hour later, after the rebels had consolidated their forces and were fully alerted to and prepared for another Union charge. Moreover, in pushing out the 3rd Vermont, the Confederates had brought to bear elements of two brigades, an overwhelming force. The 6th and 4th Vermont together could have totaled only about 750 men, if that many. If Brooks learned anything from the 3rd's experience, it should have been the strength of the rebel force on the opposite shore. Thus, it appears that having failed to maintain adequate communications with the 3rd at a critical point in its attack, Brooks attempted to reclaim a lost opportunity through a half-hearted effort doomed to failure. Reports of General Brooks and Colonel Lord, *Ibid.*, pp. 373, and 378.

²¹ Sergeant Hiram C. Holmes, discharged on June 4, 1862, for wounds received at Lee's Mills.

²² Service records of Corporal George French, 3rd Vermont Infantry.