

A UNION OFFICER'S RECOLLECTIONS OF THE NEGRO AS A SOLDIER

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ALTHOUGH the Negro figured prominently in the background to the American Civil War, the federal government was reluctant to accept him as a soldier. Not until mid-summer of 1862 was the Lincoln administration authorized to receive colored recruits.¹ Systematic enrollment did not come until the next year, months after the Emancipation Proclamation. So strong was northern prejudice against putting the black man in a blue uniform that *Harper's Weekly* devoted three pages of its issue of March 14, 1863, to illustrations of Negroes as soldiers, its editor frankly admitting that he hoped thereby to counteract the unfortunate state of public feeling on the subject. On October 21, 1863, Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* blistered Governor Horatio Seymour for refusing to follow the examples of Pennsylvania and Massachusetts in recruiting Negroes for service in the Union cause.

On May 22, 1863, the War Department finally ordered the establishment of the Bureau for Colored Troops. Within a month Major George L. Stearns was appointed recruiting officer for colored troops in the eastern and middle states. He promptly went to Philadelphia and there, amidst much enthusiasm, began his assignment.²

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¹ *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, 1880-1891), Ser. III, V, 685. Hereinafter cited as *ORA*. For early uses of Negro troops see Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols. (New York, 1884-88), II, 741, III, 524, 525, 582, IV, 13. Hereinafter cited as *Battles and Leaders*.

² *ORA*, Ser. III, Vol. III, 1111, 1112.



JOHN McMURRAY
Major, 6th Regiment, U. S. Colored Troops.

That the War Department adopted an ungenerous policy in issuing commissions to Negroes was but a reflection of popular feeling. Despite pleas to the contrary from such prominent Negroes as Frederick Douglass, colored soldiers were destined to serve principally under white officers. Whether the three examining boards (located in St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Washington) exercised greater care in selecting officers for colored troops than was generally observed in the choice of officers for white units, is a subject on which scholars have shown a wide difference of opinion.³

In charge of the Washington board was Major General Silas Casey. It was before him that John McMurray of Brookville, Pennsylvania, was to appear for a commission. Born on June 12, 1838, in Ligonier Valley, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, McMurray was still a child when his family moved to a farm in Pine Creek Township in nearby Jefferson County. Here he grew to manhood, learned the carpenter's trade, attended Brookville Academy, and taught school for three winters.⁴

When the Civil War broke out in April, 1861, McMurray was almost twenty-three years old. On August 14, 1862, he joined the newly organized 135th Pennsylvania Volunteers. With this regiment he served until it was disbanded on May 24, 1863, attaining the rank of first lieutenant. During the summer of 1863, while a private in the 57th Pennsylvania Militia at a camp near Pittsburgh, McMurray learned that Major Stearns was organizing several

³ *Ibid.*; Bell I. Wiley, *Southern Negroes, 1861-1865* (New Haven, 1938), 296-304; Joseph T. Wilson, *The Black Phalanx; A History of the Negro Soldiers of the United States in the Wars of 1775-1812, 1861-65* (Hartford, 1891), 93-110. For opposing views on the quality of officers of Negro units see Herbert Aptheker, "Negro Casualties in the Civil War," *The Journal of Negro History*, XXXII, 32; Frederick M. Binder, "Pennsylvania's Negro Regiments in the Civil War," *ibid.*, XXXVII, 401; Dudley Taylor, *The Sable Arm, Negro Troops in the Union Army* (New York, 1956), 224-228.

⁴ John McMurray, *Recollections of a Colored Troop* (privately printed, 1916), 1-4. Hereinafter cited as *Recollections*. First published in serial form in the *Jeffersonian Democrat* (Brookville, Pennsylvania), *Recollections* was printed later as a pamphlet. It has been used generously in the preparation of this study. After the war McMurray studied law, served as a delegate to the convention that in 1873 framed Pennsylvania's present constitution, became a clerk in the state auditor general's office in 1875. During President Grover Cleveland's first administration he was chief of the division of lands and railroads in the Interior Department. The centennial edition (October, 1939) of the *Jeffersonian Democrat* contains a short sketch of McMurray's life. He was interested in this paper and was somehow identified with it until his death in 1921.

regiments of Negro recruits. Applying at once for a commission, he was soon called to Washington where, upon approval by Casey's board, he was appointed by the Secretary of War to a captaincy in the 6th United States Colored Troops and ordered to report to Lieutenant Colonel Louis Wagner, Commandant of Camp William Penn.⁵

Camp Penn was located at Chelton Hills, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, a few miles north of Philadelphia. Established in mid-summer of 1863 for the purpose of training the troops Stearns was raising, it drew its recruits principally from Pennsylvania. A total of eleven regiments was formed and equipped for combat at Chelton Hills. Philadelphians took pride in the nearby camp, organizing a schedule for visitations and concerning themselves generally with the welfare of its colored soldiers.⁶

Arriving as a stranger at Camp Penn on Sunday morning, September 27, 1863, Captain McMurray reported to Commandant Wagner. During a fifteen-minute interview he was kept standing, hat in one hand and gripsack in the other, in plain view of three or four officers. Fifty years later McMurray had not forgiven Wagner for what he considered a rude reception. Shortly after this embarrassing encounter, the young captain was assigned to command Company D, 6th United States Colored Troops, and conducted to his tent headquarters. On the company's streets he had his first meeting with regimental commander Lieutenant Colonel John W. Ames. Informal and brief, it left no distinct impression on McMurray except that Ames's behavior contrasted sharply with that of Wagner. For almost two years McMurray and Ames were to lead their dusky soldiers through the swamps and onto the battlefields of the country of the York and James rivers and to conclude their efforts with the campaign against Fort Fisher in North Carolina. They were to witness death among their comrades, rejoice over the same victories, and deplore the same defeats.

⁵ *Recollections*, 2-5; William James McKnight, *Jefferson County, Pennsylvania: Her Pioneers and People*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1917), II, 200-201; *Jeffersonian Democrat*, October, 1939 (centennial edition); *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 13; Samuel P. Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-5*, 5 vols. (Harrisburg, 1871), IV, 210.

⁶ Binder, "Pennsylvania Negro Regiments in the Civil War," *loc. cit.*, 389; Frank Taylor, *Philadelphia in the Civil War, 1861-1865* (Philadelphia, 1913), 190-191.

From these experiences grew a lasting personal friendship and a sincere admiration for the Negro soldier.⁷

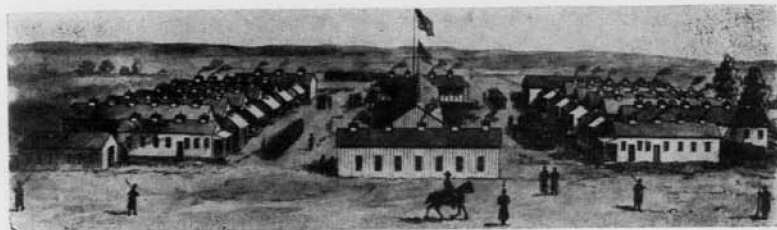
Although the task of organizing the 6th Colored Regiment was well along when Captain McMurray arrived at Camp Penn, he was to be there long enough to witness his quota of amusing incidents. Among the recruits in Company D was the son of Lydia Hamilton Smith, the housekeeper of Congressman Thaddeus Stevens. A devout Catholic, Mrs. Smith tried to rear her son Isaac in her own faith. When Isaac, for whom the church had few charms, went off to camp a mother's anxiety followed him. Early in October she paid a visit to Camp Penn. Soon after her arrival, mother and son departed for Philadelphia to call on a local priest. Shortly after entering the city Isaac deserted his mother and headed in the direction of a beer sign. After a long and anxious search, Mrs. Smith returned at twilight alone. In the morning hours Isaac approached the camp gate singing lustily: "We won't go home till morning." He was mildly punished with a short sentence in the guardhouse and an order to sweep the camp.⁸

Within two weeks after McMurray's arrival at Camp Penn, Ames's regiment was completely organized. Its complement was slightly over a thousand men. Of its ten companies, McMurray's Company D, with just under one hundred recruits, was one of the largest. Although the 6th was the second regiment to be organized at Chelton Hills, it was the first to be accorded the privilege of marching through the streets of Philadelphia. Early in October its dusky troops moved along Walnut, Pine, and Broad streets on dress parade—"blacks in blue" with white gloves and fixed bayonets. The correspondent of the *New York Tribune* reported: "They made a brilliant appearance."⁹ On the 14th the regiment paraded again, this time from the North Philadelphia railroad station to a ship waiting at the wharf to take it to Fortress Monroe, Virginia. The next day it arrived at its destination, the first of the Camp Penn trainees to reach Virginia. For many of the Negro recruits the trip from Philadelphia to Fortress Monroe was a new

⁷ *Recollections*, 3-5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8-10; *ORA*, Ser. III, Vol. III, 683; Ralph Korngold, *Thaddeus Stevens: A Being Darkly Wise and Rudely Great* (New York, 1955), 72-76, for an interesting account of Lydia Hamilton Smith. Isaac Smith deserted in December, 1864, Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers*, V, 952.

⁹ October 5, 1863.



CAMP WILLIAM PENN

*Training camp for colored troops enlisted into the United States Army, located in Cheltenham Township, Montgomery County, Pa.
(From a contemporary lithograph.)*

experience. En route some were stricken with seasickness, but upon arrival all were able to begin immediately the march of some twenty miles up the Peninsula to a camp just below the historic village of Yorktown. Here Ames's men spent their first night on Virginia soil. Here, except for minor forays, they were to remain until the latter part of April, 1864.¹⁰

Meanwhile, other colored troops were arriving on the Peninsula and in November Major General Benjamin F. Butler was assigned to command the 18th Army Corps and the Department of Virginia and North Carolina. Butler's assignment was part of a reorganization of the Union forces in the east, preparatory to a giant offensive against the Confederacy's capital city of Richmond. The 4th and 5th regiments of colored troops were now brigaded with the 6th. All three were assigned to Colonel Samuel A. Duncan and placed in Butler's 18th Army Corps.¹¹

Little company and regimental drill had been possible at Camp Penn. Consequently the men of the 6th Regiment were still raw recruits when they reached Virginia. During the first two months after their arrival Ames and his company commanders taught their troops the rudiments of military living. The weary round of camp life consisted of guard mounting in the morning, the interminable tramp of sentinels on their beats, the marching of men

¹⁰ *Recollections*, 5, 7; Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston, 1953), 186-187; Binder, "Pennsylvania Negro Regiments in the Civil War," *loc. cit.*, 398; Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers*, V, 953.

¹¹ *Recollections*, 5-6, 10; *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XXII, Pt. 1, 5, 29, and Pt. 2, 397. During the next year other colored units were moved in and out of Duncan's brigade, the 22nd being one of them, and the brigade's number was changed several times. The 4th, 5th, and 6th regiments, however, were generally kept together.

on the drill field, and "dress parade" in the evening. Trips up the Peninsula toward Richmond and expeditions north of the York River in the direction of the Rappahannock River were frequently undertaken to give practice in marching. Often the troops covered thirty miles in one day. Sometimes women gathered along the parade routes to jeer and shake their fists. Usually the troops responded with what the *New York Tribune's* correspondent described as good-natured laughter.¹²

Jeers and clenched fists, and the laughter they provoked, helped to break the monotony of the repetitious drill and the long march. So also did the preparations for reviews by such dignitaries as General Casey and the work on the fortifications at Yorktown and Gloucester Point. Occasionally a raid against a Confederate works farther up the Peninsula gave the troops a taste of real warfare. Such a raid took place on December 12-14, 1863. The object was to capture a battalion of Virginia cavalry at Charles City. Early on the 13th the 6th left camp at Yorktown to receive and guard prisoners and horses, issue rations, attend the wounded, and do picket duty. After marching twenty-four miles it reached Twelve-Mile Ordinary. There a good defensive position was selected and pickets posted. Before the day had ended the entire Confederate command at Charles City was captured and turned over to Ames's men. The next day the 6th returned to Williamsburg, having lost only one man during the encounter.¹³

Some of the officers of the 6th Regiment brought their families to Virginia. Captain McMurray's wife and two children spent part of the winter of 1863-64 on the Peninsula. They lived in good quarters, had an abundance of wholesome food, and enjoyed the associations with the wives and families of other officers. While the regiment was in camp things generally went along smoothly for the officers' families. During the long tramps, which often kept husbands away for three or four days, the women were unhappy and their men uneasy.¹⁴

By the fall of 1863 historic Yorktown was a shambles. Its few remaining buildings were occupied by poverty-stricken whites and

¹² *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XXXIII, 483; *Recollections*, 6, 10, 13; *New York Tribune*, November 25, 1863.

¹³ *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XXIX, Pt. 1, 974-976.

¹⁴ *Recollections*, 23.

Negroes. On the James side of the Peninsula was old Williamsburg. It, too, was a dismal place of some four or five hundred whites and Negroes. Along its streets McMurray led his troops a half dozen or so times during their stay on the Peninsula. Neither Yorktown nor Williamsburg offered much in the way of surcease from military routine. McMurray, however, had a good sense of history and appreciated the opportunity to walk the streets of these two old Virginia towns.¹⁵

For McMurray the most exciting incident at Camp Yorktown occurred while he was once serving as Officer of the Day. The camp was on a forty-foot bluff overlooking the York River. Directly below and close to the river's edge was a spring of water. Colonel Ames ordered the men in the guardhouse put to work in constructing a path from the camp to the spring. McMurray passed the order to a corporal, who in turn commanded the prisoners to "fall in" and go to work. One of them refused to obey and McMurray was called to the scene. Upon arrival, he observed the prisoner prostrate before the guard tent. Commanded by the Officer of the Day to "fall in," the refractory soldier again refused. McMurray then ordered him tied up and "bucked and gagged." As soon as he saw what was in store for him, the soldier sprang to his feet, drew a razor he had concealed on his person, and waving it in one hand rushed at the officer. Taken by surprise, McMurray seized a club and struck the soldier on the head. He fell to the ground and was promptly tied up.¹⁶

The news of what had happened electrified the camp and a hundred excited men quickly gathered around the guard tent. With the wildest rumors going through the camp, McMurray suddenly realized he was the symbol of those emotional ingredients which might easily explode into mutinous behavior. At this point he was rescued by a young lieutenant, who handed him a pistol. Pointing the weapon at the rapidly increasing crowd of colored troopers, the Officer of the Day explained what had happened and ordered every man to return to his quarters. The demonstration was convincing, and the crowd of milling soldiers turned and walked slowly back to their tents.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

But the incident was not yet closed. When the soldier was court-martialed for insubordination, great excitement swept the regiment once more. Meanwhile, three non-commissioned officers of the regiment had collaborated on an article which appeared in a Philadelphia paper. The article violently attacked McMurray, accusing him of brutality in the treatment of the Negro soldier. Within a few weeks the harried officer was ordered to report to General Butler's headquarters at Fortress Monroe. Already Butler's command was recognized as the champion of the colored soldier, and the young officer set out for his destination with "some trepidation." However, his fears proved groundless, for the general quickly put him at ease, asked a few perfunctory questions, and then dismissed him.¹⁸

Within five weeks after his arrival at Fortress Monroe, General Butler had become involved in altercations with Confederate authorities over the exchange of prisoners. Convinced that direct action was the answer, he devised early in 1864 a plan to set at liberty the Union captives at Richmond's Libby and Belle Isle prisons. Accordingly, on the night of February 5, the 11th Pennsylvania Cavalry, a white troop, the 4th, 5th, 6th, and 22nd colored regiments, in all about 5,000 men, rendezvoused at Williamsburg under the command of Brigadier General Isaac J. Wister. By twilight on the 6th they had reached a point within two miles of Bottom's Bridge, which crossed the Chickahominy Creek about six miles east of Libby Prison. Most of the raiders got no farther. According to McMurray, a soldier from a New York regiment, who had been confined to the guardhouse at Williamsburg under sentence of death, had escaped and beaten them across the bridge. Upon reaching Richmond, the fugitive informed Confederate authorities of the approaching raiders. Thus when the mounted men came to within a few rods of the bridge, they suddenly found themselves facing two artillery pieces that had been set up at the opposite end. Both were turned loose on them. Three or four of the foremost horses fell. The mounted men quickly faced about and began a hasty retreat to Williamsburg. Chagrined and defeated,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*; Bell I. Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank, The Common Soldier of the Union* (Indianapolis, 1952), 111.

the colored regiments, having marched forty-two miles in twenty-four hours, followed the horsemen back to camp.¹⁹

Following the abortive attempt to free the prisoners at Libby, McMurray's men took part in other late winter raids directed by Colonel Ames. Meanwhile, high-ranking Union commanders envisaged a momentous offensive. By early spring, 1864, a grand plan had emerged. It was conceived mainly by General U. S. Grant. Brought to Washington in March, he quickly decided that as overall commander of Union forces he must remain in the east and concentrate on crushing General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. To accomplish his objective Grant had two armies. Both were in Virginia. One was the Army of the Potomac, the other General Butler's Army of the James. The latter comprised the 18th and 10th army corps and numbered around 35,000 men. The 3rd Division of the 18th Army Corps was an all-colored unit commanded by Major General Edward W. Hinks. It was composed of two brigades. In charge of the 2nd Brigade was Colonel Samuel A. Duncan. To this brigade belonged the 4th, 5th, and 6th colored regiments.²⁰

On May 5, 1864, in concert with the Army of the Potomac's march toward Richmond by way of the Wilderness, Butler's Army of the James embarked at Fortress Monroe with the major units of his command. Led by ironclads and vessels of the fleet, Butler's army ascended the James River to City Point, near the mouth of the Appomattox River. The colored regiments quickly occupied City Point, which Butler declared to have been the first possession of his army, the white troops moving beyond the Appomattox River's mouth to Bermuda Hundred, which lay between the two streams. Thus by the end of the first week of May the Army of the James lay athwart the mouth of the Appomattox River, an auspicious beginning for Butler's assignment in the grand campaign.²¹

While Butler's ultimate objective was Richmond, which Grant

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25; William B. Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons* (Columbus, 1930), 112-113; *New York Herald*, November 30, 1863; Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers*, V, 943.

²⁰ *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XXXIII, 254-256, 1055, and Vol. XXXV, Pt. 1, 106-118; *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant* (New York, 1886), I, 127.

²¹ Benjamin F. Butler, *Butler's Book* (Boston, 1892), 640; *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 114; *Recollections*, 28-29.

supposed he would reach by moving up the south side of the James, it was necessary for him first to cut out certain communication lines to the south of the Confederate capital. One of these was the Richmond and Petersburg Railroad. If severed, reinforcement of Richmond from the south would be rendered extremely difficult. For nearly two weeks Butler made what Grant described as an ineffective thrust to cut this railroad. At the time of this attack McMurray complained that the Negro troops at City Point were not once called into action. Perhaps Butler did not consider them battle-worthy. That he did not order them to attack the almost defenseless city of Petersburg displeased Grant and raised some doubt about the capacity of the commander of the Army of the James.²²

Whatever Butler's advantage, he soon lost it. On May 10 General P. G. T. Beauregard arrived at Petersburg and immediately threw up a strong line of earthworks between the Richmond and Petersburg Railroad and that portion of the Army of the James that occupied Bermuda Hundred. Thus, the white units of Butler's army were, in the words of Grant, "hermetically sealed," and reinforcements from the south could be easily moved against the Army of the Potomac.²³

Still at City Point was Duncan's brigade of colored troops. Shortly after the middle of May he was ordered to move his men a distance of six miles up the Appomattox River to Spring Hill, about five miles below Petersburg. Encamped in a large field on an eminence overlooking the river, the Negro soldiers set a picket and threw out cavalry videttes toward the city. In a short time they had built a small but strong earthwork, later known as Redoubt Converse, to protect the pontoon bridge at this point. Once the fortifications were completed, the 6th Regiment was left in charge of this nearest outpost to Petersburg. The city's church spires and public buildings were in plain view, but between the city and the 6th were the Rebel defenders. However, except for the probing of small patrols, the defenders caused little trouble for Ames's men during their four weeks' stay near Petersburg. According to Mc-

²² *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, II, 148, 294; *Recollections*, 29.

²³ *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 116n. Later Grant explained that he had not intended to annoy Butler in reporting to the War Department that the Army of the James had been rendered useless. See *ibid.*, 115-116.

Murray, these skirmishes were the first fighting the 6th experienced. With the possible exception of Private Alphonso Cherry, the men of Company D bore themselves well. While on picket duty his position in the line was assaulted. After firing several shots, Cherry fell back in good order only to meet his company commander. He explained that his usefulness "out there" had ended when he shot away his ramrod. McMurray told him to return to camp, get another gun, and report back to his post. Instead of following orders, Cherry fell back all the way to Norfolk. Six months later McMurray found him with a regiment of colored cavalry and persuaded the delinquent soldier to return to his old company.²⁴

Near the Spring Hill encampment were several homes, including a comfortable farm house where lived an elderly couple. As the colored troops moved into the area, the husband visited the camp to request a guard for protection against the black troopers. Since only a colored guard was possible, difficulties ensued and the old man was confined in Fortress Monroe and his wife allowed to go to Philadelphia, where she had relatives. Shortly thereafter the house was robbed of its costly furnishings and, according to McMurray, burned for no cause whatever.²⁵ Experiences with other families near Camp Spring Hill were more pleasant. McMurray and other officers of the 6th found their way into some of their homes. Often they sat in living rooms and chatted with Virginians whose sons or brothers were serving with the Confederate forces. Close as these families were to the Union lines, they could nevertheless get letters from relatives in Lee's army by way of Richmond and Petersburg. McMurray records that his last visit to one of these homes was unceremoniously ended by approaching Confederate horsemen.²⁶

Until mid-June of 1864 the 6th Regiment had little more to its credit than marching and throwing up a few earthworks. Approximately nine months had passed since it had been organized. According to McMurray, it was now fairly well trained in company, regimental, and brigade drill, but as a fighting unit its capacity

²⁴ *Recollections*, 29, 31-33; Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers*, V, 944; *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XXXVI, Pt. 3, 421.

²⁵ *Recollections*, 29. McMurray leaves the impression that this was the work of white officers, not Negroes. *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

was still unknown. Things were soon to change, however. After Grant's regrettable assault at Cold Harbor on June 3, he decided to move around Lee's right flank, cross the James River, and strike Petersburg from Bermuda Hundred. By June 15 Grant himself had arrived at Bermuda Hundred where almost 50,000 troops were preparing to cross the Appomattox River for the projected attack. Early on the morning of the 15th Major General William F. Smith's 18th Corps, previously detached from the Army of the James to assist at Cold Harbor, began the advance. Crossing the Appomattox at the Point of Rocks on the pontoon bridge the 6th Regiment had been protecting, Smith's troops passed by this unit's camp. The 6th followed immediately, joining some nine regiments of a colored division under General Hinks. The puzzling events of June 15 were by this time well under way.²⁷

Smith's corps, consisting of his own and Hinks' division, numbered at least 12,000 men.²⁸ Hinks' division of about 5,000 was composed of three brigades. Of these, Duncan's 2nd, consisting of the 4th, 5th, 6th, and 22nd regiments, totalled in the neighborhood of 2,200. Hinks took his men along the main road. Smith moved his division of over 6,000 to the right of the road, so as to face the Petersburg defenses near the Appomattox River. By 10:00 a.m. the corps was before the city's works, Smith having the advantage of a position in a wood and Hinks being protected by a slight rise in the ground between himself and the Rebel line. Opposing the bluecoats was a thin band of troops numbering about 2,200. Until late in the day the corps' action consisted of several minor, though sharp skirmishes, those involving the 2nd Brigade occurring at Baylor's Farm. In one of them McMurray's company had several men killed and wounded. For the most part, however, Rebel fire was ineffective in the area of the 6th Regiment's movements.²⁹

Just before sundown Smith ordered the long-awaited attack. His own division of white troops, immediately to the right of the colored division, moved off first. Hinks' colored soldiers followed

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 33-34; *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, II, 276-277; *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 534-537; T. Harry Williams, *P. G. T. Beauregard, Napoleon in Gray* (Baton Rouge, 1954), 227.

²⁸ Beauregard estimated the number at 22,000. See *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 541.

²⁹ *Ibid.*; *Recollections*, 34-37; *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XXXIII, 957, 1053-1055, and Vol. XL, Pt. 2, 552-555; Duncan's report of his brigade's activities of June 15-19 may be found *ibid.*, Ser. I, Vol. L, Pt. 1, 265-269.

in column formation, with the 6th Regiment leading. In addition, at least parts of Major General Winfield Scott Hancock's 2nd Corps and Major General Ambrose E. Burnside's 9th Corps had arrived from Bermuda Hundred in time to get into the fight.³⁰ The assault fell principally between batteries 5 and 10 inclusive, the position of the 6th placing it opposite Battery No. 9.³¹ Crossing a slash that had been burned over, Ames's men moved through a line of abattis in front of a ditch which protected this battery. By sundown the ditch was full of men, who had been pressing hard against a work they believed to be well manned. Not a shot had been fired at the colored troops since they had started forward. As they began to climb out of the ditch, McMurray felt sure that as fast as a Negro soldier put his head above the level of the parapet it would be blown off. He fully expected every officer and man of his own regiment to meet death while trying to get out of that ditch. This, however, did not happen. Climbing into the battery, they found it deserted, the last Confederate gone, save a handsome youth in his late teens.³² He was dead. McMurray helped the Negroes bury him "as tenderly as though he had been a Union soldier." Thus at the very climax of the 6th Regiment's first trial under battle conditions not a shot was fired, not a man was killed, but, in the words of McMurray, "some were nearly scared to death."³³

Having broken the Confederate line, Smith ordered the attack ended. This was probably around 10:00 p.m. At once the Negro troops set their pickets, McMurray being placed in charge of the detail from his regiment. While this work was going on and for some time thereafter he heard constant noises in the direction of the city. What he correctly supposed was that reinforcements had appeared and were being hurried into positions in a new line selected by Beauregard. What he, and the Union soldiers generally,

³⁰ *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XL, Pt. 1, 168; P. G. T. Beauregard, "The Battle of Petersburg," *North American Review*, CCCLXXI, 375. General George G. Meade, Commander of the Army of the Potomac, reported that Hancock's men did all the fighting and that Smith's men merely demonstrated. McMurray claimed Smith's white troops lost 600 men in the fight. Beauregard wrote that a long sector of the Petersburg line was not manned on June 15.

³¹ *Recollections*, 37; *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 540.

³² *Recollections*, 38; Beauregard, "The Battle of Petersburg," *loc. cit.*, 372-375.

³³ *Recollections*, 38.

incorrectly believed was that the new arrivals belonged to Lieutenant General A. P. Hill's corps, veterans of Lee's army. Before midnight the new defenses were set. Twelve hours earlier, McMurray observed, Smith could have marched into Petersburg at will. Now Grant's whole army could not force its way in.³⁴

Apparently ignorant of Smith's battle plan, Hancock, waiving the rights of seniority, had placed his men at the disposal of the junior commander. After stopping the assault, Smith ordered Hancock to use his troops as replacements for the colored soldiers on the picket line.³⁵ Relieved by the major of the 3rd New Jersey Regiment, McMurray went with him to every post in the 6th Regiment's part of the line. The Pennsylvanian observed that the white soldiers, who had come through the Wilderness and had been in the slaughter at Cold Harbor, held the greatest respect for the fighting qualities of Lee's soldiers. "They supposed," McMurray noted, "the same men they had met so often were again before them, only a few rods distant in the darkness. So, as we relieved our men at post after post, we had to take the white soldiers by the arm and lead them to the places assigned them. They would not go six feet beyond where their officers would stop. They seemed to think there was one of Lee's veterans behind every tree or stump."³⁶ By midnight all the Negro soldiers were ensconced with their regiments and McMurray settled down for the rest of the night in Battery No. 9.³⁷

As McMurray lay down to sleep early in the morning of June 16, Union forces held the line of Confederate works from a position near Battery No. 10, south of the City Point road, to the Appomattox River, a distance of over a mile. Massed near Battery No. 9 were the colored troops; to their left were Hancock's 2nd and Burnside's 9th corps. Soon after daybreak the Negro regiments were sent a short distance to the rear. Here they remained during the heavy fighting of June 16-18.³⁸

By noon of June 16 Smith's division and the corps of Hancock and Burnside, 60,000 strong, confronted the new Confederate line.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 38-39; Williams, *Beauregard*, 228; *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 541.

³⁵ *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 541.

³⁶ *Recollections*, 39.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 40; Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers*, V, 944; *OR-L*, Ser. I, Vol. XL, Pt. 1, 168, 306.

Beauregard was now defending with about 14,000 men. Late in the afternoon an assault was begun on the Confederate line. It opened on Smith's left and extended along the front occupied by three corps of the Army of the Potomac (by this time Major General Gouverneur K. Warren's corps had arrived). The fighting continued, with some interruptions, into the night of June 17, when about midnight Burnside was driven back from an advanced position he had gained. On June 18 the final blow was struck. It was no more successful than the earlier ones had been.³⁹

For McMurray and the men of the 6th Regiment the three days after June 15 were filled with anxiety. The roar of cannon, the crash of muskets, and the yells of men up ahead attested only to hard fighting. The wounded and the stragglers who passed by on their way to the rear brought little good news to the Negroes, who were denied the chance to continue in the battle they had helped to open. McMurray himself was disgusted with the treatment accorded these troops. In his words, Grant had not yet learned "that black men were just as good fighters as white men."⁴⁰

A few days after the unsuccessful effort of the Union forces to take Petersburg, the colored regiments were returned to the front line of works. There they remained until July 29, when they were relieved to take part in the mine explosion of July 30. During these six weeks Ames's men, and it would seem the other colored regiments as well, would spend three days in the rifle pits and three in camp. The 6th occupied the position in the line where it crossed the road leading from Petersburg to City Point. When McMurray and his men were in the pits, there was scarcely a day that they did not suffer at least one casualty. Only at night could the men go to the sinks without offering themselves as targets to watchful Rebel riflemen. This monotonous duty was once broken by a most disagreeable assignment. It had been on the afternoon of June 18 that some of the heaviest fighting before Petersburg occurred.⁴¹ Charging through a cornfield, one of Hancock's divisions had been driven back with heavy losses. A number of dead and wounded had been left behind, the Rebels refusing permission

³⁹ *Recollections*, 40; Williams, *Beauregard*, 230-235; *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 541-544.

⁴⁰ *Recollections*, 40.

⁴¹ Union casualties from June 15-18 were approximately 10,000. See *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 544n.

to bury the dead. On a dark night about ten days later, McMurray was sent out with a burial detail. Shortly after 10:00 p.m. the cornfield was reached. In the darkness it was often impossible to distinguish a dead soldier from a section of a corn row. Decomposition added to the difficulty and repugnance of the task. When a body was found a hole would be dug beside it, the body rolled into the hole and then covered. This assignment McMurray characterized "as possibly the saddest experience of my service in the army."⁴²

On the afternoon of July 29 the 6th Regiment along with other units of Duncan's brigade moved left to the place in the line held by Burnside's corps. Here the Union and Rebel lines were less than 500 feet apart. From a ravine located behind this point in the Federal line a mine slightly over 500 feet in length had been run to and under the Confederate works as far as a small fort which stood in Elliott's Salient. The mine was charged with 8,000 pounds of powder, a fuse was laid from the powder to the mine's mouth in the ravine, and one of Burnside's divisions alerted to lead the assault after the explosion. The general's objective was an elevation called Cemetery Hill, about a quarter of a mile behind and to the right of the doomed fort. To reach and hold this height, Union commanders believed, would assure the fall of Petersburg.⁴³

After much delay and confusion, the explosion finally took place a few minutes before 5:00 a.m. on July 30. With his eyes fixed on the fort at the moment of the blast, McMurray observed it moving slowly at first and then suddenly leap up to a height of 150 feet, "breaking into fragments of timber, stone, broken gun carriages, muskets, tents, and black and mutilated bodies, all falling back quickly with a dull, sullen sound."⁴⁴ Two hundred men were killed by the explosion and the Confederate line was opened by a hole 170 feet long, 60 feet wide, and 30 feet deep. Although the Rebels were completely taken by surprise, Burnside was unable to reach his objective. Instead, columns of Negro and white troops ordered through the opening floundered in the crater, easy prey for enemy fire. Watching this struggle, McMurray thought the best fighting was done by Burnside's black division. Like all others, it, too, was hurled back into the crater by Confederate fire.

⁴² *Recollections*, 40-41.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 42-45; *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 538 (map), 545-550.

⁴⁴ *Recollections*, 43.

That night the 6th Regiment was placed on the picket line for a twenty-four hour turn. McMurray thought it the most uncomfortable picket duty he had ever done. The Federal line was in plain view of the enemy, and within easy reach of his muskets. The sun was hot during the day and the Rebels were mad, shooting on the slightest provocation. With nightfall on July 31, Captain McMurray concluded his tour of duty on the Petersburg front. On August 2 Duncan's brigade set out for Dutch Gap.⁴⁵

Although Hinks' colored division had helped open the Petersburg campaign, it was given little opportunity to demonstrate its mettle under fire. The only fighting it can be credited with had been done on June 15, and, as observed, until nearly sundown this consisted principally of minor skirmishes. At twilight the Negro units did charge the enemy's works, but at some points the line was unmanned. It will be recalled that this was the case at the 6th Regiment's point of attack. McMurray admitted that this attack had not been a real test for his men. He was not pleased with what followed. Indeed, he felt himself and his Negroes cheated when they were moved to the rear during the night of June 15-16. Because he believed in the Negro soldier, he could hold no other view. McMurray made no report of the action of June 15 that ever got into the official records, and that of Ames cannot be found. Hinks and Duncan, however, did record their impressions, and both wrote as if they believed the colored trooper had at last vindicated himself. Hinks asserted that the performance of June 15 afforded conclusive proof "that colored men when properly officered and drilled, will not only make soldiers, but the best soldiers of the line."⁴⁶ In a lengthy report of his brigade's activities of that day Duncan admitted that his "troops were all untried in battle, and by many it was still a problem whether the negro would fight." But in his judgment the events of June 15 justified "the most sanguine expectations for the future." On this day he reported that he had witnessed skirmishers push forward "with boldness" and lines advance "firmly"; he had seen the Negro assault "with gallantry" after enduring "with fortitude" hours of

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 44-45; *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 550-562; General Horace Porter, *Campaigning with Grant* (New York, 1897), 264-269.

⁴⁶ *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XL, Pt. 2, 489-491.

inaction under heavy fire; and finally, he remembered the colored trooper as bearing "heroically" the wounds of battle.⁴⁷

A few days after the Petersburg debacle, Duncan's brigade left for Dutch Gap. The new location was about fifteen miles below Richmond, at the neck of one of the numerous bends in the James River. The distance across the neck was slightly over 500 feet; around the bend it was almost five miles. In it the Confederates had placed obstructions to protect Richmond from naval attack. General Butler wanted a canal cut across the neck, so that Federal monitors might circumvent Rebel obstructions and sail to within shelling distance of the capital city.⁴⁸

The 6th Regiment encamped on the river bank near what was to become the lower opening of the canal. Brigade headquarters were established across the James in the direction of City Point. From August 10, when ground was broken, until September 28 the regiment had a daily force of 100 men working in the canal.⁴⁹ They quickly came under the fire of Confederate mortars located up the river. For protection, hiding places called "bomb-proofs" were dug in the sides of the canal. Watchmen warned the workers of approaching shells by yelling "holes." McMurray, who did not share Butler's view of the protective value of the bomb-proofs, complained that workers often found it impossible to reach the shelters; few days passed without casualties. To convey the wounded to the hospital across the river, a small boat was always standing by. McMurray visited the hospital once and was impressed with the pile of legs and arms in the rear of the amputation tent.⁵⁰

Always sensitive where the rights of Negro troops were concerned, Butler discovered in late summer of 1864 that some colored prisoners had been put to work on Rebel fortifications. In retaliation he sent some prisoners to Dutch Gap and ordered that they be put to digging in the canal. For four or five days they were kept at work, scampering with the Negro soldiers to the shelters

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Ser. I, Vol. LI, Pt. 1, 265-269; Binder, "Pennsylvania Negro Regiments in the Civil War," *loc. cit.*, 411.

⁴⁸ *Recollections*, 45; *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 575; *Butler's Book*, 743-750; Porter, *Campaigning with Grant*, 370-371.

⁴⁹ Work was completed in late 1864. The canal played no part in the fall of Richmond.

⁵⁰ *Recollections*, 46; *Butler's Book*, 748; *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLII, Pt. 1, 110, 111; Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers*, V, 944.

when shell warnings were given. McMurray did not recall that a single Confederate had been killed or wounded while working in the ditch. Once Butler received word that colored prisoners had been released from work on enemy fortifications, the Confederates were taken out of the canal.⁵¹

While the 6th was digging at Dutch Gap the siege of Petersburg was developing in such a way as to require a new assignment for Duncan's brigade.⁵² As part of the siege plan, Warren's 5th Corps was pushed out on the extreme left of the Union line in an effort to capture the Weldon Railroad. An important road connecting the besieged city with Weldon, North Carolina, it was bitterly contested. On August 18 it was taken from the Confederates, Warren at once moving his forces athwart the railroad. The Union left was thus extended to the south of Petersburg. Warren's movement was designed in part to draw Rebel troops from north of the James and thus to weaken Richmond's defenses. The Union right, which was to unleash the assault on the capital city's outer works, was composed of Major General D. B. Birney's 10th Corps and Major General E. O. C. Ord's 18th Corps. The latter was part of Butler's army. To it belonged Duncan's brigade, several units of which were to be severely mauled in the coming assault.⁵³

On September 28 Duncan's brigade was ordered to prepare itself with rations for three days and to leave behind all men unfit for a heavy march. Before dark the men were aboard a steamer heading for Deep Bottom, approximately five miles downstream from the 6th's Dutch Gap camp. About midnight the men were put ashore. Before sunrise they were marching toward the Rebel entrenchments at the foot of New Market Heights, less than two miles from Fort Harrison. Fort Harrison was Ord's objective. Had he known what was in store for him and his company during the three hours after the march began, McMurray philosophized that he would have been totally unfit for duty. "In mercy and kindness," he explained, "I was allowed to see only what each moment re-

⁵¹ *Recollections*, 46; *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLII, Pt. 2, 959; *Butler's Book*, Appendix No. 6.

⁵² The siege operation began shortly after the July 30 failure at the Crater.

⁵³ *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 568-573, 577; *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, II, 324-325.

vealed, and seeing that and only that, I went forward, trying to do the best I could, and hoping for the best results.”⁵⁴

The distance from the river to the Confederate works at the base of New Market Heights was about two miles. For about half way the brigade marched by the flank, then it formed in line of battle, with the 6th slightly to the left and McMurray's Company D near the center of the regiment. Soon after the line formed, the men emerged from a wood into an open field on the top of a hill. As the open space was reached, they saw the first rays of sunlight. They also saw the Rebel pickets falling back to their lines, turning occasionally to shoot at the black soldiers coming out of the wood. The field in front of Duncan's men was approximately 350 feet wide and it dipped slightly toward the enemy's entrenchments, which were located about one mile and a half to the right of Fort Harrison. Between its farthest edge and the Rebel rifle pits was a slash about 175 feet in width. Through it ran a stream parallel to the rifle pits.⁵⁵

The brigade marched across the open field to the edge of the slash, where, in the words of McMurray, the men paused to form in line “with as much care and accuracy as though we had been on parade.” Meanwhile, not a shot was fired from the pits, McMurray opining that the Rebels probably “looked on with great interest thinking no doubt what a lot of fools we were.” For perhaps as long as ten minutes the elegant brigade stood within 200 feet of the Confederate riflemen, awaiting the order to go forward. The colored soldiers and their white officers knew that a strong line of Rebels occupied the pits. They also knew that the moment they entered the slash, fire from those pits would come raining down upon them. Then suddenly came the order from Duncan, “and as one man we plunged into the slashing [*sic*].”⁵⁶

Picking a path through the debris in front of the enemy line was risky work. At every step the Negroes were under heavy fire. There was little chance to retaliate. Indeed, at times muskets were absolute hindrances. As he continued to go forward, McMurray noticed that the ranks were getting thinner. Seeing fewer and

⁵⁴ *Recollections*, 50-51; *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 577.

⁵⁵ *Recollections*, 51-53; *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 198; McKnight, *Jefferson County, Pennsylvania*, I, 189.

⁵⁶ *Recollections*, 52, 53.

fewer of the thirty men he had started with, he wondered if any had turned back. He passed his first sergeant, who had taken a bullet in his leg; he came upon Emanuel Patterson, who had been shot in the abdomen "so that his bowels all gushed out." On he pressed, urging his men forward and passing others of his company, some dead and some wounded. About halfway through the slash, the captain's life was saved, when a color guard who preceded him through a small opening between the trunk of a fallen tree and its stump was killed instantly by a shot through the breast.⁵⁷

Finally McMurray broke through the slash into a small open space before the enemy's rifle pits. There for the first time since the assault had begun he met Colonel Ames. The two officers held a hasty conference and decided to fall back with what remained of the regiment. Ames urged the captain to get the men back quickly and stressed the importance of keeping them well in hand. With their backs to the enemy, the Negro troops proved helpless in the tangled mass of debris and bodies through which they had to return. Once back in the open field, each company officer began the work of collecting his men so that the regiment might be re-formed. For McMurray this proved a discouraging task. Of Company D's thirty men who had plunged into the slash less than an hour earlier, only three had survived. Twelve had been killed and fifteen wounded. The company's first lieutenant had also been wounded. Over eighty-five per cent of its men had been lost. The regiment's losses were proportionately less, but nonetheless heavy: 3 officers and 39 men killed, 11 officers and 150 men wounded, and 7 missing—a total of 210 out of 367. In forty minutes, McMurray averred, Confederate musketry had accorded his company the dubious distinction of having suffered greater losses than reported by any other Union army company in a single charge.⁵⁸

The regimental formation completed, McMurray joined some officers of the 6th in search of dead bodies. All was now quiet before the enemy entrenchments. The Rebels had fallen back, having lost Fort Harrison; but before leaving they had gone over the battle-

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 54-55, 58; McKnight, *Jefferson County, Pennsylvania*, I, 189, II, 201; *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLII, Pt. 1, 136, Pt. 3, 161-162. Only 8 of the 6th's 10 companies were used in the assault.

field and taken everything they wanted. Muskets had been gathered up, shoes taken from dead men's feet, pockets turned inside out, and cartridge boxes and haversacks carried away. Partly stripped bodies of Negro soldiers, 12 of them from his own company, lying among stumps and trees was hardly a sight to inspire McMurray to glorify war. On the other hand, whatever doubts of the Negro's fighting qualities he may have clung to at sunrise had been dispelled by mid-afternoon.⁵⁹

It took about an hour to examine the battleground. Afterwards the officers returned to their regiment. Leaving their dead in the slash, they were soon on the way to Fort Harrison. Ironically, they now crossed the line of rifle pits held by the Rebels only a few hours earlier. On to the fort they pushed, where late in the afternoon they were to be used to help repel Major General Charles W. Field's assault to retake this important work. Before this action, however, the 6th's officers and men were to witness a futile charge against nearby Fort Gilmer by a brigade of white troops from Major General Adelbert Ames's division, which was supported by a regiment from Brigadier General William Birney's colored brigade.⁶⁰ Here the supporting troops advanced farther than the assaulting force. McMurray recalled seeing the black men pass the white troops, drive on "until they reached the ditch, and attempt to climb up the face of the parapet into the fort, and . . . some of them clubbed down with rebel muskets."⁶¹ Useless and foolhardy were their efforts in the face of resistance that soon compelled them to fall back. McMurray's explanation of what he saw is revealing. In his judgment it had resulted from the ability of the white soldiers to sense when they were defeated and turn back, while the Negroes had not yet learned that much and knew only that they must go forward until ordered to retreat. This point of view helps to explain the careful attention given to the formation of Duncan's brigade in preparation for its own assault at New Market Heights earlier in the day. It also sheds some light on regimental

⁵⁹ *Recollections*, 55-57. As General Butler rode over the battlefield he claimed to have sworn "to myself an oath . . . that they and their race should be cared for and protected by me to the extent of my power so long as I lived." See *Butler's Book*, 733.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 736-737; *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 198, 577; Edward A. Pollard, *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates* (New York, 1867), 608.

⁶¹ *Recollections*, 57, 58-59.

commander John W. Ames's instruction to McMurray to keep the troops well in hand during the retreat through the slash.

Late in the afternoon of September 29 Union troops at Fort Harrison saw Confederate General Fields making preparations to recapture this important work. Assault columns were taking form in an oak grove approximately 600 feet from the line of works the Rebels had lost during the morning. Since the preparations indicated the point against which the charge was to be directed, the defenders were able to set up a stout defense. Ensconced on the reverse side of the line of works, they were actually in a ditch behind a breastwork about four feet high built of logs and earth. Near the point where the attack was expected Major General George J. Stannard's brigade of Vermont troops was placed. His men were armed with "sixteen shooters"—rifles holding sixteen bullets which could be fired without reloading. To the right of the New Englanders was Ames's 6th Regiment.⁶²

Once the assaulting columns were formed and all was in readiness for the attack, the Confederates opened on the Union lines with about forty guns. During the cannonading additional regiments of defenders were hurried into their places. Shortly after the artillery fire ceased, Rebel columns, five brigades of them, emerged from the oak trees.⁶³ McMurray saw the enemy as "a mighty, resistless, human machine." Knowing that the men in the advancing columns were his sworn foes, bent on killing him and all the defenders of the newly captured Fort Harrison, he yet admired them as they came on with the "steadiness of a great machine, and the determination of death." At this moment the captain, whose company had been almost entirely wiped out a few hours earlier, felt that he was witnessing an exhibition of "bravery scarcely excelled." Not a shot was fired, not a word was uttered as the Rebels moved to within 175 feet of the defenders. Then suddenly came that "infernal rebel yell" as the advancing men increased their pace to almost a run. Now the men in the ditch opened a murderous fire and for a few minutes the roar of musketry, the Rebel yell, and the shouting of bluecoats was deafening. On came the Confederates until they were within forty or fifty feet of McMurray and his comrades of the 6th. When they could

⁶² *Ibid.*, 59.

⁶³ *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 577.

take no more, the assailants turned about and ran back at full speed. For some reason Union fire abruptly stopped, and the victorious defenders watched what was left of the solid mass of assaulters that had so recently come out of the oak grove vanish at the place of its birth. The men of the 6th would have experienced a "savage satisfaction" had they been assured that the 2,000 Confederate casualties were exacted from the same units that had eviscerated their regiment earlier in the day.⁶⁴

After the broken columns had passed from sight, the 6th Regiment was taken out of the line. The men quickly pitched their shelter tents for a night's rest, while most of the officers slept in comfortable huts recently occupied by the enemy. September 29 had been the bloodiest day of the war for Ames's men. As it ended, McMurray was sad and gloomy. He recalled that less than a year before he had left Camp Penn with some 90 men. Of this force, only three were now present for duty. Since sunrise a third of the original group, about the number he had taken into action at New Market Heights, had been killed and wounded. As he ate his supper these frightening experiences kept haunting him. Afterwards a feeling of oppression seized him. Breathing became difficult. For relief he left his hut and spent a good portion of the night walking around it. But there was no relief; instead he became "wild and crazy." In a state of complete nervous exhaustion, he was taken to the corps hospital. There he remained for ten days, consuming a liberal allowance of quinine which "toned" him up.⁶⁵

Along with other units of Duncan's colored troops, the 6th Regiment remained bivouacked near Fort Harrison from September 29 until December 18. During these two and one half months its complement was brought up to 400, the approximate strength of the regiment before the action at New Market Heights.⁶⁶ Each of

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*; *Recollections*, 59-60.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 61-62. Ames was wounded during the action of the afternoon of September 29. On or about October 25, 1864, he became commander of the 3rd Colored Brigade. Lieutenant Colonel Clark E. Royce succeeded him as commander of the 6th Regiment. By the end of 1864 Ames had been placed in charge of the 2nd Colored Brigade. He remained in this post until February 28, 1865, when he relieved Major Augustus B. Boernstein, who had succeeded Royce as commander of the 6th Regiment. See *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLII, Pt. 3, 354, 467, 1126, and Ser. I, Vol. XLVI, Pt. 2, 337, 751.

⁶⁶ The 6th had left Camp Penn with over 1,000 men. McMurray's company at that time had between 90 and 100 men and was the largest in the regiment. Before June 15, 1864, it had been cut to about half that number by discharges, promotions, desertions, and reorganization. *Recollections*, 7, 61, 62.

the ten companies thus had about forty men. Comfortably encamped, the men of the 6th did little drilling and picket duty. Indeed, they worked less during the fall of 1864 than at any time since they had reached Virginia. Even so, life was not particularly dull for the colored soldiers. Those who observed the incident were doubtless amused at the reprimand McMurray received for drilling men in his shirt sleeves. During these months the Christian Commission helped to make life easier. Anxious to provide religious services for colored troops, the Commission erected a tent near the 6th's quarters. The commander of Company D went to the tent one evening to see how the services were conducted. It was full of soldiers before whom stood a handsome young man on a platform that reached across one end of the tent. After some singing and praying, the young man explained that the meeting was especially for the Negroes. Eager to make them feel at home, he invited some to join him on the platform and expressed the hope that they be prompt about it. In a few minutes stalwart colored soldiers, entirely at home at such a meeting, filled the platform and took over the meeting "under a full head of steam."⁶⁷

The most joyous occasion for the 6th Regiment during the fall of 1864 was planned by General Butler himself, for the purpose of honoring those Negroes who had taken part in the Battle of New Market Heights. In this engagement, as the general was to admit, he had deliberately exposed his Negro troops to the loss of greater numbers than he believed the capture of the redoubt was worth. According to a judgment he made long after the events of September 29, 1864, the capture of Fort Harrison rendered unnecessary the attack on the Heights. On the other hand, if Ord had failed in his objective, then the engagement over the Heights would have been more than futile. Why then did Butler order the assault? His own explanation was that there had been a "great purpose" back of this decision. In fact, there would seem to have been two purposes. First, he was looking for a chance to prove that Negroes would fight, so as to end the uneasiness of white soldiers who in the future might be flanked by them. The colored soldier, he believed, had not been given sufficient opportunity to prove his valor. This had been McMurray's view after the retirement of Duncan's

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

brigade before Petersburg on June 15. Also, Butler was determined to prove false the cry that Negroes were making no real sacrifices in behalf of their own freedom. It was his judgment, and one shared by both Ames and McMurray, that the Army of the James looked upon a Negro regiment after September 29 "as the safest flanking regiment that could be put in line."⁶⁸

Accordingly, on October 11, 1864, General Butler issued a lengthy general order. For their conduct on September 29 the colored troops and their officers were acclaimed in language that could leave little doubt about Butler's feelings. "Of the colored soldiers . . .," he announced, "the general commanding desires to make special mention. In the charge on the enemy's works by the colored division of the Eighteenth Corps at Spring Hill, New Market—better men were never better led, better officers never led better men. With hardly an exception officers of colored troops have justified the care with which they have been selected. A few more such gallant charges and to command colored troops will be the post of honor in the American armies. The colored soldiers by coolness, steadiness, and determined courage and dash have silenced every cavil of the doubters of their soldierly capacity, and drawn tokens of admiration from their enemies. . . ."⁶⁹ The order continued by singling out for special mention many individual regiments, among them the 6th, and by authorizing the inscription on their regimental flags of "Petersburg" and "New Market Heights" for gallantry on June 15 and September 29 respectively. For individual acts of bravery at New Market Heights, Butler had a medal struck. Copied after the one Queen Victoria gave to her distinguished private soldiers of the Crimean War, it was awarded to nearly 200 Negroes.⁷⁰

As the end of 1864 approached, but one great port of entry remained in the Confederacy. This was Wilmington, North Carolina, on the Cape Fear River. Some twenty miles upstream, its seaward access was protected by formidable Fort Fisher near the tip of Federal Point Peninsula, formed by the Carolina coast and the Cape Fear River running south from the city. Late in December General Butler and Admiral David D. Porter undertook a

⁶⁸ *Butler's Book*, 742; *Recollections*, 52.

⁶⁹ The complete text of the order may be found in *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLII, Pt. 3, 161-175.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* Pictures of the medal appear in *Butler's Book*, 743.

joint campaign against the fort, the general supplying between 7,000 and 8,000 soldiers. Among them was Duncan's old brigade, now commanded by Colonel John W. Ames, formerly of the 6th Regiment.⁷¹ The operation was poorly handled, partly because Butler and Porter were not on good terms. On Christmas Day Porter subjected the Confederate bastion to a heavy six-hour bombardment during which some white soldiers under Major General Godfrey Weitzel were landed for reconnaissance purposes. McMurray witnessed the bombardment, noted that the guns of the fort responded feebly, and concluded that nothing could possibly have survived Porter's pounding. However, Butler and Weitzel agreed that the defensive power of the fortification had been little affected. An assault, they concluded, would be futile. Accordingly, the troops were returned to the James River.⁷²

In late December McMurray was back at Fort Harrison. He was now placed in charge of some 200 of the brigade's men declared unfit for duty. Shaken up by their late sea voyage, they were to be given a month-long rest. Meanwhile, a second expedition against Fort Fisher, this one under Major General Alfred H. Terry, was successfully concluded. By mid-January of 1865 Union forces were preparing to move up Federal Point Peninsula toward Wilmington. Early in February McMurray and his "invalids" rejoined their regiments, then occupying a line across the peninsula about two miles north of the fort. Here in what was literally a swamp the brigade built many corduroy roads to enable movement from one part of the line to another.⁷³

A short distance north of the Union works Major General Robert F. Hoke with about 3,000 Confederates had thrown up a defensive line. Extending across the peninsula, it paralleled Terry's. Early in February Major General John M. Schofield's 23rd Army Corps joined Terry's 10th Army Corps. Both were attached to General W. T. Sherman's forces during the campaign in North

⁷¹ The brigade was now in the 3rd Division, 25th Army Corps. Brigadier General Charles J. Paine commanded the division. In command of the 6th Regiment at this time was Major A. S. Boernstein.

⁷² *Recollections*, 66-68; *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 655-657; *Butler's Book*, 791-799.

⁷³ *Recollections*, 68-71; *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 642, 657-661, 698; *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVI, Pt. 2, 61. Terry's force was composed of many of the same units that Weitzel had earlier taken to Fort Fisher. Paine's division of colored troops went on both expeditions. On January 7, 1865, Grant relieved Butler of his command and appointed General Ord as his successor.

Carolina.⁷⁴ After Schofield's arrival, Union troops south of Wilmington numbered approximately 20,000.⁷⁵ The last of several encounters with Hoke occurred on February 20. Retiring up the peninsula afterwards, the Confederate commander put the torch to much property. Early on the afternoon of February 22 Paine's division of colored troops entered Wilmington. Saddened to find the wharves and storage buildings along the river front a smoldering ruin, McMurray recalled that not a man, woman, child, or dog was to be seen in any direction. He believed the city's funereal mien infected the soldiers, who soberly marched over its streets, stooping now and then to pick up some tobacco that had eluded the flames, and finally halted north of it in an open field near the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad.⁷⁶

After a short rest during which the men had coffee and divided their tobacco, the march was resumed. About nine miles north of Wilmington, at the point where the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad crossed the Cape Fear River, Paine's division encamped. In this area the whole of Terry's corps remained until March 16. Across the river was a small Rebel force. As neither antagonist molested the other, the three weeks spent in this camp passed quietly. On March 16 Terry's army marched to Faison Station. Also on the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad, it was about sixteen miles south of Goldsboro, North Carolina. The fifty miles from the Cape Fear River camp were covered in two days. Here Terry and his men remained for another three weeks, almost totally ignorant of the momentous events to the west of them in North Carolina and around Petersburg that were hastening the war's end.⁷⁷

It was at the camp near Goldsboro that McMurray had an important and somewhat unusual experience. While on picket duty he refused to permit a detail to go through the line, having been specifically instructed by the brigade officer of the day that General Paine had given such an order. When the sergeant in charge of the detail returned with a pass signed by General Terry's adjutant, McMurray persisted in his refusal. The privileges of rank were

⁷⁴ *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. 1, 46-57; *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 696-698.

⁷⁵ Paine's division of about 3,500 was the only colored unit.

⁷⁶ *Recollections*, 71-73; *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVI, Pt. 1, 424, and Vol. XLVII, Pt. 1, 925-926; Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers*, V, 945.

⁷⁷ *Recollections*, 73-75.

quickly invoked. McMurray was at once relieved of picket duty and ordered under arrest by headquarters. On the third day after his arrest he wrote a letter to Terry, explaining the whole affair and requesting release. Forwarded through channels, the letter got no farther than division headquarters. There Paine intercepted it and sent for the arrested officer. Once Paine convinced himself that his order had been executed precisely as McMurray had received it, he explained that no such order had been intended. After Paine and Terry discussed the matter, another order came down releasing McMurray. The next day a third order, this one from Paine, made McMurray the inspecting officer on the division commander's staff. This post he was to hold until he was mustered out six months later.⁷⁸

The new inspecting officer found his duties to be onerous. Gone were the days of the intimate contacts with the Negro soldier on the march, at rest, and during a skirmish. A new kind of military life awaited McMurray. He was quickly inducted into the world of the staff officer, for within a few days after his appointment General Terry reviewed his troops. Unused to riding a horse, the neophyte was so sore after the review that for several days he took his meals while standing.⁷⁹

Nearly a week later, which was on or about April 8, Terry's men broke camp at Faison Station and started toward Raleigh. In a pine forest south of Bentonville, where on March 19 Sherman and Johnston had fought their last major battle, news of Lee's surrender reached the men of Paine's division. A lusty shout of triumph rang through the pines. On toward Raleigh Terry's men pushed, learning as they approached that city that the armies of both Sherman and Johnston were bivouacked nearby. About a mile outside the city Terry's men also camped. Here they remained for several days, while arrangements were being worked out for Johnston's surrender. Late in April the surrender came and immediately Paine's division was sent to Goldsboro. A month later it moved to New Bern. Here Paine became Commander of the District of New Bern, McMurray automatically assuming the office of District Inspector. This post he was to hold until September 20,

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 79-81; Kate M. Scott, *History of Jefferson County, Pennsylvania* (Syracuse, 1888), 193-194.

⁷⁹ *Recollections*, 82.

when he returned to Philadelphia to be mustered out with his old regiment.⁸⁰

McMurray's service with colored troops covered about two years. Except for the last six months of this period, he was a company commander. As such he was in close touch with the Negro soldier. His was not a personality of complexes seeking escape by volunteering to lead men of black skins into battle. On the contrary, McMurray was by nature simple, informal, and democratic; and he proved to be a good combat officer. He had the confidence of his regimental commander and what was just as important, he was respected by his own men. His *Recollections* reveal him to have been a man of some modesty. He was dignified, not without humor, and confident of his ability to handle himself in difficult situations. A Democrat in politics when the war began, he remained so throughout his life. One therefore looks in vain for the Grand Army of the Republic bias.

If McMurray's record as a soldier has any claim to distinction, it must rest on his devotion to an ideal. So strong was this ideal that it induced him to offer to make the supreme sacrifice at the head of a column of colored soldiers. It is doubtful that he knew as many as a half dozen Negroes before his arrival at Camp Penn in the late summer of 1863. Yet here was a man who was convinced that Negroes would fight well, if properly trained and competently led. Further, he believed that they must fight to help make the ideals of the founding fathers meaningful to blacks and whites alike. One gets the impression that this is what gave direction to McMurray. What other explanation is there for his disappointment at the order which sent his soldiers to the rear early in the fighting before Petersburg? Or his contempt for those who made this decision? One also gets an occasional glimpse of condescension toward the black man; and there were moments of disgust with the colored trooper's deportment. More often, however, McMurray's feeling toward his men was a composite of sorrow, pride, concern, and sincere gratitude. It is unlikely that he deliberately sought to convey this view in his *Recollections*. If this is an accurate judgment, then his behavior would seem to have been that of a responsible officer, who believed he was somehow contributing to a fuller realization of the promise of American life.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 83-93 *passim*. As he was waiting to be mustered out, McMurray received his majority.