PITTSBURGH VOLUNTEERS WITH SICKLES' EXCELSIOR BRIGADE

Bruce Sutherland

There was a lot of military excitement in the American states during the months before the fall of Fort Sumter but it had little to do with thoughts of war. The center of activity was Chicago where Elmer E. Ellsworth, in April 1859, had organized a drill company which he called the United States Zouave Cadets.

The young men of this company, Ellsworth himself was only twenty-two, dedicated their spare time to the perfection of difficult drill routines and to a physical fitness program that was unusual for the time. They forswore all drinking and gambling, pledged never to frequent unsavory establishments and even agreed to forego the comparatively innocent pastime of billiards. Reading and chess were to be the diversions of their leisure.

This training program proved to be so successful that on September 15, 1859, the Cadets won their first drill competition before a large audience at the United States Agricultural Society Fair. This victory brought them not only a handsome stand of colors but also the adulation of the crowd, and the Cadets were soon deluged with invitations to give exhibition drills.

Ellsworth, never a shy young man, was encouraged by this success to challenge all military companies in the United States and Canada to compete for the drill championship of the continent. There were no takers. Convinced of the invincibility of his drill unit, Ellsworth now prepared to take the nation by storm. After a winter of preparation the Cadets embarked on an exhibition tour, eastward from Chicago through New England and the Middle Atlantic states. Everywhere they performed superbly; in each community audiences were moved and deeply impressed.

The Chicago Zouaves arrived in Pittsburgh on Monday, August 6, 1860, a little after midday. They were welcomed by some of the local military companies, by military bands and by a goodly number of curious spectators. After a parade through downtown Pittsburgh the Chicago visitors spent the night at the armory of the Duquesne Dr. Sutherland, Professor of English Literature at The Pennsylvania State University, was educated at Dartmouth and the University of Pennsylvania. He spent the year 1951-52 in Australia as Fulbright Research Scholar.—Ed.
The following morning, after breakfast at the Monongahela House, they marched out to the Fair Grounds where, under a blazing sun, they performed their unique drill. Members of the local military companies were aware that they had just witnessed the work of professionals and were properly impressed.¹

Within a week, on August 13th, "a large number of gentlemen who are about starting a company of Zouaves . . . . on the plan of the Chicago Zouaves . . . ." ² held an organizational meeting at 144 Fourth Street. Four days later eighty young men had been elected to membership and civil officers had been chosen. By August 27th the United States Zouave Cadets of Pittsburgh had acquired an armory of their own in the Lyons Building on Fifth Street, had adopted the peculiar uniform of the Chicago company and had begun to learn some of the drill routines. On August 30th they gave their first public performance.

During the winter of 1860-61 the Zouave Cadets drilled regularly every Friday evening. More than a hundred men had been elected to membership. R. Miller was now president of the organization, ably seconded by B. B. Hazeltine as secretary and W. E. Barrenne as treasurer. By the time Fort Sumter fell the Cadets were a well drilled, fully equipped military company commanded by Captain Robert Biddle Roberts.

The news of Fort Sumter affected Pittsburgh much as it did other northern cities. A giant mass meeting was held in the City Hall on Monday, April 15, 1861, and the recruiting of troops began. President Lincoln had called upon the states for 75,000 militia for three months service. Secretary of War Cameron had hurriedly assigned state quotas and had wired the various governors to assemble the regiments at designated points. Regimental size was set at 37 officers and 743 men; Pennsylvania was asked to supply 16 such regiments; the quota for New York was seventeen.

By April 17th the Zouave Cadets had 125 members and more were clamoring for admission. Their armory was a beehive of military activity, daily thronged with spectators. On the 19th, ladies connected with the Third Ward School presented the company with a silk flag and on the 24th Mrs. William Bagaley, on behalf of the

¹ The activities of Elmer E. Ellsworth and the United States Zouave Cadets are well described by Charles A. Ingraham in Elmer E. Ellsworth and the Zouaves of '61. Published for the Chicago Historical Society by the University of Chicago Press (Chicago, 1925).
² Pittsburgh Gazette, Tuesday, August 14, 1860.
ladies of Allegheny, presented the company with another flag as they embarked in the rain for Harrisburg and the war.1 This first company of Zouave Cadets had become Co. I., of the 12th Regiment Penna. (3 months) Volunteers.

At Camp Scott, near York, Captain Biddle Roberts left the unit and joined the staff of Governor Curtin. He was succeeded by Captain George W. Tanner. Other United States Zouave Cadets were enrolled in Co. K., 5th Regiment Penna. (3 months) Volunteers under Captain George Seigrist. At the expiration of the three months service many of the men joined three year regiments but lost their identity as Zouave Cadets, although as late as July 17th "Capt. Ormsby, Lieut. (James) Sutherland, Lieut. Bagaley and Sergeant Miller of Co. D., U.S. Zouave Cadets, 12th Regt. . . ." 4 had opened a recruiting office in the Lyons Building.

Under Lincoln's call for militia the Allegheny County quota was soon filled. By May 2nd 64 companies averaging 70 men each had been formed in the Pittsburgh area and soon there were many companies with no place to go. Among these "unaccepted companies" was Co. B., of the United States Zouave Cadets commanded by Captain De Zouche. Temporarily it was assigned to the first regiment of Home Guards but this proved to be an unsatisfactory expedient. On May 7th the company was reorganized under Captain John P. Glass and Lieutenants James H. Stewart, Francis E. Tyler and Milton B. Miller, but no provision had been made for acceptance into either state or federal service.

Meanwhile, in New York City, events were transpiring that were to color the lives of all members of Co. B. Daniel E. Sickles had the war fever. Late in April he and his friend William Wiley got authorization from Governor Edwin Morgan to raise a regiment, and $500.00 from the Union Defense Committee to further the effort. Sickles had handbills printed and posted, made recruiting speeches and got wide newspaper publicity. Within two weeks he had raised eight companies; by the middle of May a brigade of more than 3,000 men had been formed. This was to be the nucleus of the famed Excelsior Brigade. Sickles' initial success at recruiting men nearly proved his undoing. Governor Morgan, acting on the premise that the raising of so many troops in New York City was the cause of unrest in the upstate counties, ordered Sickles to disband all but eight of the forty companies he had raised.

3 Pittsburgh Gazette, Thursday, April 25, 1861.
4 Pittsburgh Gazette, Wednesday, July 17, 1861.
Outraged, Sickles went to Washington and proposed to President Lincoln that the Excelsior Brigade be accepted by the Federal government directly as United States Volunteers. Lincoln liked the idea, Secretary Cameron approved, and thus the matter was allowed to stand temporarily. Sickles believed that he now had authorization to raise troops for Federal service, men who could be enlisted for three years, or for the duration of the war, regardless of state lines. Consequently, Sickles looked for men not only in the city and in the interior counties of New York, but also in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Michigan and elsewhere.

Two Pittsburgh companies were invited to join the Sickles Brigade. The Friend Rifle Guards, equipped through the generosity of Porter B. Friend, was commanded by Captain Jacob Brunn who had received his military training in the Prussian army; Company B., of the United States Zouave Cadets, was commanded by Captain John P. Glass. Both companies were accepted by Sickles before May 25th and the men were excited because active service seemed assured. On June 5, 1861, the Friend Rifle Guards left Pittsburgh for New York. The following day the Zouave Cadets departed from the Central R.R. station where a female pickpocket made farewells more exciting by making off with several purses. In Philadelphia the Zouaves were quartered at the Continental Hotel and Philadelphians thought them "handsomely uniformed" and of "a creditable appearance." By June 8th the Cadets, 100 strong under the command of Lieutenants Stewart and Tyler, were encamped in the rawly new Camp Scott, on Staten Island.

Camp Scott was located on an extensive plateau "a mile south-easterly from Fort Richmond, extending from the line of Dr Post's house to New Dorp Lane, and running with a gradual slope to the waters of the Lower Bay." The tract, of about 10,000 acres, was nearly square, "well furnished with wood and water . . ." Surgeon Thomas T. Ellis found the approach to the camp lovely, "from Vanderbilt Landing, along a beautiful road, which passes through the village of Clifton," but the isolated position of the Camp, "the soft, muddy nature of the ground and the difficulty in guarding against desertion by the men, and thieving by Staten Islanders—a nest of whom from Rocky Hollow made nightly visits," made the camp site undesirable in his eyes. Also, within an eighth of a mile

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5 W. A. Swanberg, Sickles the Incredible (Scribners, N. Y., 1956).
6 Philadelphia Public Ledger, June 10, 1861.
of the camp was a frame cottage "in which the vilest liquor was sold, and from whence it was daily smuggled into camp." 7

The Pittsburgh boys enjoyed the early days at Camp Scott. They adapted themselves to the routine of camp life and soon accepted their new identification. The Friend Rifles had become Company E. of the First Excelsior Regiment and the Zouave Cadets Company A. of the Fifth Excelsior Regiment. On June 10th William Slaughterbeck of the Friend Rifles wrote to the Pittsburgh Gazette,

The boys are well and in the best of spirits. We rise at 5 a.m. and retire at 9 p.m. About a quarter of a mile from the camp we reach the beach of the broad Atlantic, and our boys generally have a swim at about 6 a.m. The first time we went to bathe one of the company took an old Pittsburgh run, jump and dive, and coming to the surface as soon as he could recover breath, exclaimed with a very long face, "Oh, Lord! It's salt!"

Slaughterbeck went on to describe the regimental parade of the preceding day where the Friend Rifles had been "acknowledged the crack company of the Brigade," and continued,

Our rations are excellent. We generally have fresh, well cooked beef, and potatoes, coffee, etc. .... Since our arrival here we have all been encamped in a large circus tent [which Sickles had procured from the great Barnum]. The Zouaves have also, since their advent, been in our quarters, but if the weather continues fair we will slumber in our new quarters tonight.

There is not a single Pittsburgher either in the guard house or hospital. This speaks well for our deportment.

Felix Brannigan of the Zouave Cadets likewise found camp life invigorating. In a letter to his sister dated June 18th he explained that the men were comfortably quartered in 14 tents with eight men to a tent:

I spread my India rubber [blanket] on the floor of the tent which has become beautifully hard; on that I place my regulation blanket then hunt up a soft stone for a pillow, wrap up in my shawl and drop into the arms of Morpheus until revillee in the morning, when we drill for an hour, rush to the beach and enjoy the luxury of a bath in the sea until breakfast time.

There are any quantity of cool springs of water (and whiskey) in and around the Camp, so there is no excuse for uncleanness. Our grub is pretty good considering but the less said on the subject the better .... 8

Despite these cheerful letters all was not well with the Sickles Brigade. Most of the men had joined up expecting to go on active duty immediately; many thought that the war would soon be over. They were embarrassed, after rousing home town send-offs, to be stuck in a camp far from the seat of war. Men began to leave the

7 Thomas T. Ellis, Leaves from the Diary of an Army Surgeon (N. Y., 1863).
8 The Civil War letters of Felix Brannigan, Congressional Medal of Honor, are in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.
Brigade by ones, twos and company units. In order to keep his men together Sickles, by his own estimate, had incurred debts amounting to $400,000. He had received very little help either from the State of New York or the Federal government and his position was precarious. New York papers were full of news dealing with the "scandalous" doings at Camp Scott.

The Pittsburgh companies were, of course, affected though few of the men already in camp were rebellious. It was the new men, recently recruited in Pittsburgh by Captains Brunn and Glass and Lieutenants Bishop and Ahl, who precipitated trouble. These men, passing through Philadelphia, were twitted for not joining Pennsylvania regiments; they were told that the Sickles Brigade was being disbanded; some were hijacked into joining Colonel Murphy's Jackson Regiment of Philadelphia. Even the more level headed were disillusioned with General Sickles long before they reached Camp Scott, and even though they were greeted enthusiastically by the Pittsburghers already in camp they were not happy.

It was an unfortunate coincidence that the full force of General Sickles' wrath should fall upon the new units from Pittsburgh. On the evening of June 27th some of the new Friend Rifles, Co. B., under Lieutenant James Bishop, and some of the new Zouave Cadets, Co. C., under Lieutenant Thomas J. Ahl, took French leave of Camp Scott and embarked on the Quarantine ferryboat intending to go to New York. The pursuit was led personally by Sickles who, with the help of Captain Quartermain of the Long Island Blues, forced the men back to camp. The New York Tribune was indignant, more through hatred for Sickles than for any feeling for the men. "The Seceders were then marched back to camp between double files of guards with fixed bayonets . . . . As these men were not sworn into the service of the United States, it does not appear that Mr. Sickles had any right to compel them to return to camp." ⁹

Such incidents were a part of the confusion of war time mobilization. There was some anger and some shame. One Zouave Cadet wrote that the deserting soldiers were "persons who had never been away from their mother's apron strings" ¹⁰ and that they had been homesick since their arrival in camp. Brannigan felt that the whole incident had been overplayed by the papers, but another Zouave, Francis M. Remeley, insisted that only the "sore heads" had tried

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¹⁰ Letter signed "A summer boy," Pittsburgh Gazette, July 2, 1861.
to leave while those willing to fight a war had joined with the units already in camp.¹¹

The most impartial report of the event is that of Joseph Twichell, Chaplain of the Second Excelsior, who described the situation in a letter to his father on July 3rd:

...... In some respects the most interesting event since my connection with the Brigade took place immediately after [the Sunday service on June 30th]. You perhaps remember noticing in the paper an account of the desertion and recapture of an insubordinate Pittsburgh Company—how the General rode down to the Ferry, and pistol in hand forced them back—how they were thrust into a guard house and fed like swine—how a writ of habeas corpus was served on the General and a session of the Superior court held on the grounds etc. I believe it was all in the papers. Well, the guard house is hard by the big tent where we hold morning service and many of the prisoners were at the windows. After benediction the Adjutant of my regiment came to me saying that some of the jail-birds had expressed a desire to have religious exercises held with them ...... So, after Brigade service in the afternoon ...... we went in. They assembled at one end of the building, about 70 of them, and we both of us preached to them ...... We found that many of them could sing which added much to the enjoyment of the meeting ...... We had some talk with them after we were through and found them very intelligent—in fact as intelligent as any company in the Brigade. As soon as they are released they purpose joining some Pennsylvania Regiment. I am sorry for it. Of course we avoided all discussion of the merits of their case because it was out of our province.¹²

Most of the men involved did join other regiments. Lieutenant Thomas J. Ahl joined the 28th Pennsylvania under Colonel Geary and before the war was over himself commanded the regiment. James Bishop went with the 102nd Pennsylvania Volunteers and was a captain at the expiration of his service. The Pittsburgh companies remaining at Camp Scott were too busy to harbor grievances. The Friend Rifles had been mustered into the service of the United States on June 21st and the Zouave Cadets on the following day. Very few in either company had been rejected though "one young man who was refused on account of his youthfulness, shed tears when discharged."¹³

The high point of their training came on the Fourth of July. Visitors flocked to Camp Scott from New York and various parts of Staten Island. From the Ferry landing one could find "plenty of nondescript vehicles to bring you for a dime right into camp."¹⁴

In the morning there was a grand dress parade of the entire Excelsior Brigade. In the afternoon there were orations and speeches and a special address by General Sickles in which he promised that

¹¹ Pittsburgh Gazette, July 2, 1861.
¹² The letters of Joseph Twichell are in the Yale University Library.
¹³ Pittsburgh Gazette, June 22, 1861, letter signed "R."
¹⁴ Twichell Papers, op. cit.
the Brigade would be fully equipped within ten days and off to the war within three weeks.

The men were excited and happy in spite of the scorching afternoon heat. That evening there was a magnificent display of fireworks and a grand ball. The dance was held in the guard house which had been scrubbed and decorated with oak leaves and evergreens. Brannigan of the Zouaves had a marvellous time:

A good many of the gentry in epauletts were cut out by "High privates" and non-coms. I had the good fortune to be introduced to a beautiful piece of Staten Island calico which extended to me a very polite invitation to visit and partake of Strawberries and Cream etc. . . . whenever I had opportunity. Neither gallantry nor camp fare would permit me to decline.  

One brutal incident marred the festivities of the day. A soldier of the Brigade with a long history of insubordination and drunkenness was bayoneted to death while trying to break through the guard. This was the first violent death to occur in the camp and its very violence was sobering. "This incident has had a great effect upon the boys," wrote one of the Friend Rifles, "and they are all at roll call now night and morning."  

Each day the war was coming a little closer.

Although the sanitary conditions at Camp Scott were not of the best there was not much illness among the Pittsburgh boys. The sun and salt water bathing helped more than did the Epsom salts and castor oil that was a regular part of the medical treatment. Two Zouave Cadets came down with mild cases of measles, and others, including William C. Dithridge who was later to die at Bristoe Station, developed irritating but not serious dysentery. Illness did not disrupt the life of Camp Scott but the first battle of Bull Run certainly did.

The long neglect of General Sickles and his Brigade came to an end with the panic of Bull Run. The Excelsior regiments were ordered to Washington immediately and on July 22nd Sickles wrote to Secretary Cameron,

Three [regiments] will go immediately. The first leaves today. I hope to day to be informed that orders have been issued to purchase here at least the indispensable articles of equipment for them. Up to this hour we have received neither pay, clothing, nor anything but subsistence from the government . . . .  

Chaplain Twichell was worried also. "My only fears," he wrote,

15 Brannigan Letters, op. cit.
16 Pittsburgh Gazette, July 11, 1861, letter signed "Dick."
“are for the men who will not be equipped as they should be. They are very jubilant at the prospect of departure and the camp was never so merry.” 18

The First Excelsiors, now the 70th New York Volunteer Infantry, with the Friend Rifles as Co. E., entrained for Washington on the 23rd of July. The Fifth Excelsiors, now the 74th New York Volunteer Infantry, with the Zouave Cadets as Co. A., did not break camp until August 20th when they left Staten Island on the steamer John Potter and entrained on the Camden and Amboy R.R. for Philadelphia. The next day, still not at full regimental strength, they enjoyed the hospitality of the Cooper Shop Refreshment Saloon before taking the cars for Washington.

The Excelsior regiments were among the first of the new regiments to arrive in Washington following the debacle of Bull Run. All along the route of the Camden and Amboy R.R., and in Philadelphia, they were treated as conquering heroes. Chaplain Twichell remarked of his own regiment, the Second, “if a guard had not been posted at every door of every neighboring rum-hole [in Philadelphia] the regiment would have been made a drunken one by mistaken liberality. As it was bottles were circulated somewhat . . . .” 19 The Third Regiment was welcomed with even more violent enthusiasm to the crackling of fireworks and firearms. In the confusion Archibald McNeil of Co. G. was seriously wounded in the jaw by a stray bullet.20

The First Regiment reached Washington on July 25th and proceeded immediately to Meridian Heights where it encamped at a spot that was to be known as Camp McClellan. Under the rigid discipline of Colonel William Dwight the regiment drilled, engaged in target practice and put on snappy dress parades. On the 8th of August the regiment was ordered to the encampment at Good Hope, about four miles southeast of the Capitol directly across the Anacostia, a branch of the Potomac, from the Washington Navy Yard. That day the First Excelsiors marched through the city, down Pennsylvania Avenue, passing in review before President Lincoln and General Sickles at the White House. Unaccustomed to the heavy field equipment and the torrid heat, it was 120 degrees in the sun, men began to fall out before the Capitol itself was reached. Most re-

18 Twichell Papers, op. cit.
19 Ibid.
covered sufficiently to reach Camp Caldwell at Good Hope by evening.21

Within a few weeks all of the Excelsior regiments were together in the vicinity of Good Hope. The men were now fully armed and equipped and in the process of being whipped into soldierly shape. Though in Maryland, and near Washington, they were now in secession country and they were made to feel it. "Everybody but the vegetable peddlers refuses us any greeting," wrote Twichell. "All look glum. The man on whose land we are pitched has a son—an officer in the Confederate army, and he protested against our stopping here—in fact, our advance guard was warned off every place they fixed upon the first day and compelled to bivouac in the road for the night." 22

On Sunday, September the 7th, the Zouaves set out with their regiment on a three weeks march through Charles and St. Mary's Counties, to be followed by the Friend Rifles and the First Regiment the next day. The purpose of the campaign was to break up Confederate smuggling and recruiting activities. Dozens of towns and villages were searched. At Piscataway Confederate recruits had skedaddled before the troops arrived. At Charlotte Hall uniforms and guns were found hidden in the Academy building. At both Newport and Port Tobacco arms were discovered and confiscated. The final day of the expedition, September 29th, the men marched the 18 miles from Piscataway to Good Hope in four-and-a-half hours. They had come a long way since the sunstruck parade in Washington. 23

The early days of October were spent in erecting forts along the eastern branch of the Potomac, necessary but boring work. On the 11th Joseph Hooker was made a divisional commander and the Excelsior Brigade became a part of his command. Hooker’s Division was ordered to protect Potomac shipping up and down the river from Budd’s Ferry. By the 7th of November the Excelsior regiments were established in the vicinity of Liverpool Point. The most exciting incident to happen to the Brigade occurred near Budd’s Ferry on October 21st. A spent shell from a Confederate Battery landed near the Third Regiment. It was emptied of its powder and used as a ball to play catch until Private John W. Rouse fool-

22 Twichell Papers, op. cit.
23 Stevenson, op. cit.
ishly put a lighted cigar to the fuse hole, killing himself and a comrade, Michael Daley.  

The Fifth Regiment with the Zouave Cadets had gone to Port Tobacco on October 29th. Brannigan gives a good description of the town as it then was:

[It] stands at the head of Tobacco Inlet, an arm of the Potomac six miles in length. It is one of the oldest towns in Maryland and presents a very flourishing appearance. It boasts a square, two Hotels, a Court House, jail, drug store, Printing house, grocery, a few negro shanties and large heaps of empty oyster shells which stand very prominently opposite an undertakers headquarters. It is nearly opposite Mathias Point which is supposed to be strongly fortified by the enemy. It is at this point where we will most probably cross the river, storm the works and attack old "Jeff."  

Brannigan was not aware of the fact that the Confederate command was harboring invasion thoughts of its own. General Joseph E. Johnston wanted to take the offensive and arranged for a conference at Fairfax Court House in early October where he, President Davis and Generals Beauregard and Gustavus Smith could talk things over. The generals wanted to cross the river, cut off the communications of fortified Washington and carry the war into enemy country. President Davis demurred at taking such a risk and proposed instead that a limited operation be launched against the Sickles Brigade on the Lower Potomac. This time the generals demurred because a hit-and-run attack across a wide river patrolled by enemy gunboats would be an extremely hazardous undertaking. Nothing came of either plan except that for years after the war controversy raged as to who was right.  

Meanwhile, the Union Navy had given serious thought to the establishment of beachheads on the Virginia side of the river. As early as June 23rd, 1861, Commander J. H. Ward had asked for 200 troops to aid in an attack on Mathias Point. He got no army support, but attacked anyway with landing parties from the Freeborn and the Pawnee. This attack was repulsed and Captain Ward was killed. On August 20th Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles strongly urged Secretary of War Simon Cameron toward a joint effort against Mathias Point;  

The Navy will at any moment contribute its efforts toward seizing and holding that place. Can not a sufficient force be sent down forthwith to seize and, in connection with such armed vessels as we can order

24 Twichell Papers, op. cit.; W. H. Cudworth, History of the First Regiment of Massachusetts Infantry (Boston, 1866).  
25 Brannigan Letters, op. cit.  
26 Gustavus W. Smith, Confederate War Papers (New York, 1884).
for that purpose, hold Mathias Point and thus keep open the navigation of the Potomac? 27

General McClellan replied on the 24th, recommending "that an examination of the point indicated may be made by a boat party."

The Navy, responsible for keeping the Potomac open, felt the urgency more than did the Army. Welles wanted, at least, troops and batteries on the Maryland side to offset those on the Virginia side, so on October 18th McClellan sent some infantry and cavalry "with orders to examine the country thoroughly, to ascertain whether or not it is necessary to erect heavy batteries for the protection of navigation . . . . " 28

The impetuous Sickles was not one to wait upon formality. Since the high command seemed disposed to little more than letter writing, he acted on his own. Without consulting either McClellan or Hooker he ordered Colonel Charles K. Graham of the Fifth Excelsior to make a reconnaissance in force on Mathias Point. (Whether or not Sickles actually issued the order he was certainly well aware of what was going on.) With 400 picked men from his regiment, including the Zouave Cadets, and with help from the naval vessels Island Belle and Dana, Graham’s expedition set out on Sunday evening, November 10th, from Chapel Point in Tobacco Creek. Lt. Commander Samuel Magaw who was in command of the naval units was ordered by his superiors not to participate, but naval volunteers carried out the assignment anyway.

The expedition met with little resistance after landing. Several enemy pickets were routed; the masked batteries proved to contain no guns. Rebel houses and barns were burned and the point was explored for some four miles inland. Horses were captured, grain was destroyed. The main enemy force was nine miles from the landing and it was considered unwise to attack. By noon the next day the force was back at Port Tobacco having suffered no casualties. This was the first offensive action of the war for the men of the Fifth Excelsior and while it was barren of results all felt like veterans. Hooker was annoyed but forgave Colonel Graham. McClellan was annoyed and ordered the arrest of the Colonel. Graham was soon returned to duty when it was discovered that the destroyed property had really been used for military purposes. 29

There was to be no more action in the winter of 1861-62. The Brigade settled down to winter quarters, with the Fifth Regiment located at Camp Woodhull, Maryland. Without waiting for orders Brannigan and his mates of Co. A. had dug in by early December;

We have dug a cellar about three feet deep and built a log cabin inside the tent, so that no wind can penetrate to us. In one corner we have excavated a large fire place which causes breaches in the neighboring fences . . . . opposite to the fire we have arranged our beds in two tiers . . . . we have them made wide enough for three in a bed, so that we have the advantage of three good double blankets over us. We had some old blankets left which we sewed together & filled with leaves, it makes a splendid mattress. [George] Whitesides and I have got an elegant sufficiency of blankets between us; they amount in number only to eight . . . . [George] Rinehart, [David C.] DeZouche and [Thomas J.] Patterson sleep in the lower bunk. Whitesides, myself and [James F.] Franklin are to have the upper one. We are as comfortable as if we were in town.10

There was picket duty and also some patrolling along the river and even some banter with the enemy who threatened to give the “damned Sickley Brigade hell” and who in turn were reminded that they hadn’t been so courageous at Mathias Point, but the winter was mostly tedium.

There had been some sickness in the camps starting in August and continuing through the winter. The Second Excelsiors were particularly hard hit with intermittent fever and the dread typhoid. Chaplain Twichell was deeply disturbed. “Several hours each day I spend at the hospital, bathing sores, laying wet cloths on burning foreheads, encouraging the despondent . . . . ,” and he felt strongly about the lack of proper care for the ailing.31 The Zouave Cadets were fortunate enough to have little serious illness. John W. Reismeyer (John D. Rolmeyer), who in civilian life had been a printer and had enlisted in spite of frail health, died at Port Tobacco of typhoid on November 11, 1861. James Verner was discharged for disability at Camp Magaw, Maryland, in February, 1862. The Friend Rifles did not fare so well. William M. McCandless died of typhoid at Camp Farnum on March 13, 1862, while seven others, Weston Bowen, William G. Comerford, David L. Evans, James Laughlin, Jacob B. Murray, Martin V. B. Paterson and Joseph S. Pauline, were all discharged for disability as a result of illness between August 1861 and March 1862.

One macabre incident did come out of the illnesses in camp. A practical joker with a twisted sense of humor wrote to the

30 Brannigan Letters, op. cit.
31 Twichell Papers, op. cit.
Pittsburgh Chronicle on December 2nd, forging the signature of Lieut. W. H. Denniston, stating that Matthew McGraw (who later was killed at Gettysburg), Joseph Flowers, Joseph Pauline, Daniel Sneebaker (Daniel Brubecker), Samuel Hays and Joseph Sweeney (killed in a railroad accident while on furlough, March 30, 1864) "have died of swamp and bilious fever, within a week" at Camp Orr, near Budd's Ferry. Lieut. Denniston soon set this straight, but there was much anxiety in the families of those concerned.32

The morale of the Excelsior regiments was spotty. The men were an odd mixture, recruited from New York City and numerous small towns. In general, the city men were the more recalcitrant. James Stevenson, who had enlisted in the First Regiment from Paterson, New Jersey, recalled

A person belonging to the Excelsior Brigade met with nothing but scorn and contempt from the majority of the people, and to be a member of the SICKLES' Brigade, was all that was necessary to exclude you from any society or company, and repeatedly have I felt the sting of such insults myself . . . no name was too bad for you; one would call you this and another would call you that, and even a person's own relatives would censure him for joining such a Brigade as that of DANIEL E. SICKLES.33

The Second and Fourth Excelsior regiments, the latter made up of firemen from New York City and known as the Second Fire Zouaves, though they proved to be formidable fighting units, were full of various kinds of hell and firewater. Twichell was appalled by the tenacity with which the men of his unit could ferret out liquor and the ferocity of the feuds among the officers.

. . . The use of rum is undoubtedly our worst evil among both officers and men. I have witnessed some disgraceful scenes of debauchery since I assumed my present place . . . . One would think that liquor might be kept out of camp altogether by an exercise of official vigilance. So far as that is concerned I will say this: that I. B. Gough himself could not have advised more stringent or persistent measures than those which were employed before our last pay day, to ferrit out and seize, all rum likely to be sold within miles of the regiment. Nearly a hundred gallons of rot-gut were in the Col's tent at one time, taken from houses and barns. Yet, two days after the money came men would be found drunk. It was concealed in the woods, reached only by a secret path, and more trouble would be taken to get at it, than a seeker after holiness ever employed.34

The Pittsburgh companies, however, were above reproach. The N. Y. Tribune had nothing but the highest praise for the Fifth Regiment while it was at Camp Scott following the departure of the other regiments:

32 Pittsburgh Gazette, Dec. 11, 1861.
33 Stevenson, op. cit.
34 Twichell Papers, op. cit.
This camp is the most quiet and orderly we have witnessed. The men are from various sections of the country, and of the best material. There is one company from Cambridge, Mass.; one from Pittsburgh, Penn.; models both of temperance and discipline. The other companies are filled up of men from the interior of New York. Not a single case of drunkenness has occurred among the rank and file of the regiment; nor a fight or open quarrel . . . 35

Furthermore, the men saved their money. On October 1st, the Zouave Cadets received back pay up to the first of September, some $6,000.00. Of this sum $4,000 was sent home to relatives in the Pittsburgh area. In December Capt. Brunn of the Friend Rifles sent $1,000.00 to the relatives of the men in his company, which could be picked up “by calling at Morgenstern and Bros., corner Fifth and Wood Streets.” These boys were living up to the Ellsworth code in spite of war and boredom.

Because of persistent rumors that the Brigade was to be shipped to Charleston, South Carolina, or even farther south, there had been a lag in the building of winter quarters. Work was still going on late in January. The Zouave Cadets and the rest of the Fifth Excelsiors were at Camp Magaw, near Liverpool Point. The camp was named in honor of the naval commander who had helped to arrange the Mathias Point expedition.

The log houses of the Cadets were built on the bank of the Potomac but were screened by a stand of pine trees from the enemy batteries which consistently shelled the area. The weather remained mixed but mostly bad. On March 3rd Brannigan wrote, “We are still floundering about in the mud,—it is now pitch dark—the wind is blowing a hurricane, and lashing old Potomac’s waves to an assault on the crumbling banks. I can hear the breakers dashing on the shore as I write.” 36 The best thing about the weather was that it made regular drill impossible, but there were reviews whenever the weather permitted. On the first General Sickles reviewed the entire Brigade on the parade ground at Camp Woodhull and was well satisfied with the result. The next day he inspected the Fifth Regiment even though the area was under fire from a Confederate rifled howitzer.

By the second week of March it was apparent that Confederate forces were withdrawing from their positions along the river. On Sunday the 9th one of the Cadets stood on the river bank watching the fires made by burning rebel supplies. “We can see down the

36 Brannigan Letters, op. cit.
river, as far as the Aquia Creek batteries, and up as far as the Quantico Creek batteries... Several explosions were heard... probably the blowing up of fortifications.”

It was also apparent that the Union Army was on the move. On March 17th Samuel A. McFarland reported from Camp Magaw,

Today a large fleet of some thirteen steamers passed our camp, on their way to Fortress Monroe. All the gunboats laying here under command of Capt. Magaw, were ordered to join them on arrival at Liverpool Point... Capt. Glass was out drilling the regiment, and drew the men up in line on the river bank, at the same time proposing three cheers...

McFarland also noted that Orderly Sergeant Charles S. Preston (later killed at Wapping Heights) was entertaining his father that week-end in camp.

Units from Hooker's division had been engaged in probing operations to discover the extent of the Confederate withdrawal. The same day that the Zouaves were cheering the flotilla, the Friend Rifles were reconnoitering on the Virginia side of the river. They had made the crossing the night before in small boats and bitter cold weather. It was three in the morning before the first craft landed. When no enemy was found near the landing place, fires were lighted and the men dried their sopping clothes. Led by a contraband named “Potomac Jim” they marched toward Stafford Court House, but turned back when it was discovered that a large body of the enemy had dug in there. On the return to the river the march led through Dumfries, recently a Confederate Camp, and here the men feasted on dry crackers left behind by the enemy. They did not get back to Shipping Point for the return river crossing until 6 o'clock, after 12 hours of marching.

On April Fools' Day Sickles himself led a unit of regimental strength, made up of picked men from each of the five Excelsior regiments, in an advance on Stafford Court House, Virginia. Both Rifles and Cadets participated. There was some skirmishing with Confederate cavalry units, but no serious fighting. The town was on fire when the Excelsiors arrived and Sickles remarked, “Well, boys, we are going to have neither fight nor supper tonight.” Before regaining their base in Maryland the corps had marched over 48 miles in 17 hours, which led Stevenson to remark wryly:

I believe that the advance of General Sickles on Stafford Court House was attended with as much embarrassment and fatigue, and, I venture to

37 Pittsburgh Gazette, March 5, 1862.
38 Pittsburgh Gazette, March 26, 1862.
39 Stevenson, op. cit.
say the distance was greater and accomplished in less time than any march during the war.\textsuperscript{40}

Chaplain Twichell, who had not been on the march, added a sad postscript:

One of our men, Louis McFee of Co. H., on returning exhausted by 48 hours marching and loss of sleep, procured some vile whiskey and drank it to excess . . . . and was found dead in his tent . . . . appoplexy of the brain the doctors said . . . . murder and suicide, everybody else.\textsuperscript{41}

The movement toward the Peninsula had already begun and the Excelsior regiments started to embark on April 5th. The fleet of transports remained near Liverpool Point until the afternoon of the 9th, when it started down the Potomac. There had been a severe snowstorm on the 7th which delayed embarkation, and men not already on board ship huddled in the deserted winter huts of the Fifth Regiment. The following day it rained, and more snow on the next forced the fleet to anchor at Port Tobacco. Finally, on the 11th and 12th of April the Brigade arrived at Fortress Monroe.

The trip was far from enjoyable. Some of the men were on the transports a full week, food ran low, the weather was bad and men were seasick, there was little comfort and less cleanliness. Joseph Twichell called it a “nasty voyage . . . . Wind, rain and heavy seas, have combined to pen us in doors and make us uncomfortable,” yet the irrepressible Felix Brannigan could write, “The trip down the Potomac and Chesapeake Bay was enjoyed by us all, as the scenery was beautiful and at many points magnificent.”

The men of all the regiments were excited by their first glimpse of the \textit{Monitor}, that “Yankee Cheesebox” which just a month earlier had battled with the \textit{Merrimac}. Brannigan was disappointed that he could not witness a return engagement. From Hampton Roads he could see the \textit{Merrimac} through the haze. “She fired two shotted guns and saluted to the \textit{Monitor} with her colors as a token that she was ready for the combat, but for some reason that I cannot discover it was declined.” \textsuperscript{42}

By stages the Brigade after disembarking moved from Ship Point to Yorktown. There was arduous pioneering work to do and dangerous picket duty. The men built entrenchments, erected batteries and conducted various fatigue details, often under fire. The Zouave Cadets had reached the works before Yorktown on April 18th after a hard march. Without supper, they were ordered out

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{41} Twichell Papers, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{42} Brannigan Letters, \textit{op. cit.}
to work until two in the morning on a masked battery; the work could not be done in daytime because of enemy snipers. They all swore with Brannigan, "May I be blown to hell from a mortar if you'll catch me soldiering again . . .," but the work went on. There was some rebellion. Capt. Brainerd of the 50th N.Y. Vols. reported that on the night of April 21st, "200 men of the 74th N.Y. (Fifth Excelsior) positively refused to work . . . and returned to their camp about 9 p.m." 43

The Confederate defenders of the Yorktown fortifications had received their orders to evacuate. During the night of May 1st a heavy cannonade was started to use up fixed ammunition. The cannonading continued all of the next day and night and well into Saturday, May 3rd. The Fifth Excelsiors were on picket.

... the rebels fired shot and shell into our midst so thickly that we thought there was going to be a general onset. We had to lie down all night for fear the rebels would find out our lurking places . . .

About three o'clock in the morning, they opened fire into the woods where we were concealed, thinking they would find out our position. 44

No one in the Fifth was hurt, but the First Excelsiors, on picket the next morning, were not so lucky. Frank Dell of Co. F. lost a leg and William Elliott of Co. I. was wounded in the foot. In the camp of the Third Excelsior a case shot "richochetted upon the roof of a shelter tent, in which three soldiers were, making a lively exchange of parallelograms of dirty pasteboard." 45

The evacuation of Yorktown took place the night of Saturday, May 3rd. In a dispatch dated 5 A.M. May 4th Colonel W. R. Brewster gloated, "Yorktown is evacuated, and I claim for my regiment (73d N.Y.V., Hooker's Division) the honor of first planting the Stars and Stripes upon the rebel fortifications in the town of Yorktown." 46 The Fifth Excelsiors shared the honors with the Fourth. Both regiments returned to their camps proudly displaying captured rebel flags.

The Confederate withdrawal was toward Williamsburg, about twelve miles northwest of Yorktown. Not until noon of May 4th did the pursuit get started, and in the beginning the troops were retarded by torpedoes or land mines that were planted all over the place. The Fifth Excelsiors had marched about 12 miles by night-

44 J. R. Burns, Battle of Williamsburg (New York, 1865), 15.
45 New York Tribune, May 6, 1862.
46 Ibid. Similar claims were made for the 62nd and 105th Pennsylvania Volunteers and for the 22nd Massachusetts Volunteers.
fall only to discover that they were off course, so they had to take off in another direction for several miles. The rain was coming down in torrents when the troops finally bivouacked in a wood at midnight. Without food or shelter they rested as best they could on the soaking ground.

The Confederate position near Williamsburg was a strong one. Two streams, College, which flowed toward the James, and Queen's, which flowed into the York, were natural obstacles. The headwaters of the two streams were about a mile apart, so there was only about two miles of front in which an army might maneuver. Across this space were 13 defensive works with Fort Magruder in the center. The fort was located at the fork where the Yorktown and Hampton (or Warwick or Lee's Mill) roads joined about a mile southeast of Williamsburg. The fort, mounting 13 guns, was protected by felled timber for six or seven hundred yards in front, and the open space before the fort was filled with rifle pits. It was an excellent position for a rear guard delaying action.

General Hooker's Division was the second one of the Third Corps. On the morning of May 5th about 7 o'clock, skirmishers from Hooker's First Brigade under General Grover made contact with the enemy, left of the Hampton Road and about a mile from Fort Magruder. Before long the infantry was heavily engaged and the Third, or Jersey Brigade, went to the aid of General Grover. The Excelsiors were Hooker's Second Brigade. In this action they were shy one regiment, the Second, which was still on duty near Yorktown, and they were being held in reserve. The First Massachusetts, so heavily engaged that they ran out of ammunition, were relieved by the Third Excelsiors who advanced and tried to silence a battery, only to be driven back. At 11 o'clock they were reinforced by the First Excelsior Regiment (with the Friend Rifles). Both units held their position in the slashing but took terrible losses. In the early afternoon the Fourth and Fifth Excelsiors (with the Zouave Cadets) were sent into action on the right of Hampton Road and the battle continued well into the afternoon. Gradually the Excelsiors were driven back by repeated attacks; they were short of ammunition and no aid was in sight. Then, between two and three o'clock, General Phil Kearney and his division arrived to the rescue. The combined units battled until dusk.

What had started as a probing, forward thrust and a rear guard action had turned into a pitched battle—one that possibly need not
have been fought. For those involved it was one of the most severe engagements of the war. Lieut. Willard Bullard, Co. I, Fifth Excelsiors, found it worse than either Chancellorsville or Gettysburg—the lines were closer together when they exchanged fire than on any other occasion in his experience. James Burns, also of the Fifth, was wounded in the leg and arm, and left in an exposed position when his comrades were forced to retire 50 yards. Men of the Fifth North Carolina gave him water and one gave him a long drink of thin, but refreshing molasses.47

There were some atrocity stories. Sergeant John H. Pease of the First Excelsior and Friend Rifles was wounded and taken prisoner. He and two boys (he was only 21 himself) were tied to the tail of a loaded wagon and started toward Richmond. Lieut. Nelson, of the same regiment, wounded and unable to walk, was bayoneted and left by the side of the road to die.48 Carl Wriborg of the Third Excelsiors was wounded and helpless when the Confederates overran his position. One of the men said, "This Yankee ain't dead," and clubbed him over the head with a musket. Wriborg, unable to do more than crawl, got a rifle and cartridges and killed five of the enemy—shooting them in the back after they passed over him. He died later while his leg was being amputated.49

The Union forces were outnumbered in the battle but not greatly. Hooker's three brigades faced six of Longstreet's which were not at full strength. The tragedy was that with unlimited reinforcements near at hand no troops came to Hooker's aid except those of General Kearney. Hooker's report was bitter:

History will not be believed when it is told that the noble officers and men of my division were permitted to carry on this unequal struggle from morning until night unaided in the presence of more than 30,000 of their comrades with arms in their hands; nevertheless it is true.50

This was the first pitched battle to take place in the East since Bull Run, and the first to be felt seriously by the citizens of Pittsburgh. Both the Friend Rifles and the Zouave Cadets had suffered severely. Felix Brannigan, of the Zouaves, was so shocked and bewildered that he lost track of time. He wrote to his sister on the 6th of May which he thought to be the fourth,

We've won a glorious Victory, but alas the field is literally covered with

47 Burns, op. cit., vi.
49 David B. Parker, A Chautauqua Boy in '61 ... (Boston, 1912), 15.
our dead. O the sight of so many pale faces is horrible. The reality surpasses any description of a battle I ever heard of. For full nine hours we poured a steady stream of musketry into the rebel ranks, which they responded to without flinching, and darkness alone ended the slaughter . . . . The reason we were cut up so greatly was that we were near the Colors . . . . Skeet [William Speith] and Sergeant [John M.] Fulton were buried this morning and the place marked by the boys.51

Speith and Fulton (who was the son of the Reverend J. G. Fulton of East Liberty) were killed; Samuel McFarland died of his wounds; David De Zouche, John Verner, Lewis Shuck and John Wilson were wounded. George J. Bond, later wounded at Gettysburg, was missing; Francis Remeley, who had been a compositor for the Gazette, was also missing but lived to serve for the duration.

The Friend Rifles suffered much more severely. Corporal William B. Palmer described the battle in a letter to his brother:

We advanced through the fallen timber [to the support of the Third Regiment], and opened fire upon them when within about 100 yards. We had to lie down to load. After firing one or two volleys the enemy flanked us . . . . Firing, we retreated in good order, and fell back on our 4th and 5th regiments where we made a stand . . . . [William C.] Wylie, [John] Kress, Sergeant [Robert G.] Hare, Sergeant [Augustus R.] Temmie, myself and about twenty effective men are all we have left.52

The Pittsburgh casualties for this one company came to thirty-six. Captain Jacob Brunn and Lieut. M. B. Miller were dead, as were Sergeant W. P. Finley, Corporal David C. Young, John C. Earl, Fred G. Rawl, John Dearing and Jesse Gessenger. Thomas Scanlon died of his wounds; Joseph Cathcart, John Campbell, Thomas Dardis, David M. Russell, Joseph Spake, Joseph Felter, John Buck, Morgan Lutton, Robert McClelland, Thomas F. Ebens, and John H. Pease were all wounded so severely that they were discharged for disability within the year. The remaining wounded recovered and continued on to other battles. Those taken prisoner were escorted to Richmond and from thence returned to their lines under a flag of truce. Frank H. Smith, later killed at Wapping Heights, and the son of Prof. W. D. Smith, was one of the prisoners who arrived home in Pittsburgh on May 26th, accompanied by ten of his fellow Rifles, all of whom continued the war with their unit.53

The same day, Monday, May 26th, 1862, Captain Jacob Brunn was buried with military honors in the Jewish Cemetery at Troy Hill. The whole city participated, out of respect for Capt. Brunn,

51 Brannigan Letters, op. cit.
52 Pittsburgh Gazette, May 26, 1862.
53 Pittsburgh Gazette, May 26, 1862.
but also because this funeral was a symbolic one. For the first time in the war Pittsburgh had suffered shocking losses, and the public grief was manifested in the respect paid to the Jewish immigrant Captain who had met his death leading local boys into their first battle.

Dr. Sutherland plans to continue the war experiences of "Pittsburgh Volunteers with Sickles' Excelsior Brigade" to Second Bull Run, to Wapping Heights after Gettysburg, and then to their final year of war ending in the summer of 1864.—Ed.