PITTSBURGH VOLUNTEERS WITH SICKLES’ EXCELSIOR BRIGADE

BRUCE SUTHERLAND

PART 4

GETTYSBURG TO PETERSBURG

The Chancellorsville losses had been heavy but not devastating among the Excelsior regiments. William G. Ritchie of the Friend Rifles was wounded, Nicholas Burton of the Zouave Cadets was killed and Charles A. Mullens from the Tidioute company was captured. General Revere’s action in withdrawing the Brigade may have been overly cautious but it prevented additional casualties and had little effect upon the final outcome of the battle.

It was a grim return to Falmouth for the Excelsiors with their commanding officer in disgrace and slated for a court-martial, for some of this disgrace did seep down to the ranks. There was little sympathy for General Revere. He had not been with the Brigade long enough to inspire the loyalty and affection that had been freely given to General Sickles and no Excelsior would have thought of accusing Sickles of seeking a handy scapegoat upon whom he could vent his own frustrations over the outcome of the battle.

At the court-martial, held at Third Corps Headquarters near Falmouth May 13th to 15th, 1863, General Revere faced two charges preferred by General Sickles. The first, that he “did march his command an unnecessary distance to the rear to reform it, and did march with his brigade . . . to United States Ford . . . ,” without proper orders, made some sense. The second charge reveals the pettiness of a man striking out in blind anger and Sickles was certainly angry when he berated Revere for allowing “public property to the amount of 189 muskets, 178 sets of accoutrements, 259 bayonets, 28,440 rounds of small arms ammunition, 1,779 knapsacks, This is the final article on the Pittsburgh companies with Sickles’ Brigade. There is much interest and there are many inquiries from families about members who served in the Civil War, information which is sometimes difficult to find. According to the author, perhaps “the chief value of these articles lies in the fact that they contain information about a good many ‘unrecognized’ individuals who took part in the Civil War and who may well have descendants still living in Pennsylvania.”—Ed.
836 haversacks, 494 canteens, 2,000 shelter tents, and fifty-five pioneer tools, in the service of his command, to be abandoned, and to fall into the hands of the enemy." ¹

The defense put up by General Revere was eloquent but ineffective. He pointed out that his men were exhausted with four days of marching and fighting, that they had had no rest or food for twenty-four hours and that for four hours they had been bitterly engaged with the enemy. Consequently, "... after the fight was ended [Sunday morning, May 3rd], left without orders, and crowded off the field, I led away a handful of worn and discouraged men toward a point where, in my belief, an action might even then be going on, and brought them back within six hours, after retiring less than three miles, two thousand strong, refreshed and resupplied. Was this a breach of duty?" ² The Court found General Revere guilty of marching his men "to about three miles from the scene of action ...," threw out the second charge entirely, and sentenced the General to be dismissed from the military service of the United States.

The verdict was made known to General Revere on August 15, 1863. It came as a severe blow to the man who had entered the United States Navy in 1828 as a fourteen-year-old midshipman, who had raised and organized the Seventh Regiment of New Jersey Volunteers at the beginning of the war and had fought with them since Williamsburg, who had two brothers in the Federal service and who was a descendant of the Revolutionary War hero, Paul Revere, yet the verdict could hardly have been otherwise. The feeling of the officers and men of the Excelsior regiments is best expressed in a letter to Revere from Colonel E. J. Farnum, who had succeeded him as commander of the Brigade. The letter, dated May 20, 1863, was signed by line and staff officers from the five regiments. It extolled Revere's "personal courage" and "soldierly attributes" and praised him as "a brave man, and an honorable soldier," but refused to condone the withdrawal. "As to the movements that were subsequently made, when the fighting was over, I do not feel called upon to express an opinion, as it has been made the business of a General Court Martial." ³

Of more immediate concern to the enlisted men was the filthy state of the old Falmouth campsites many of which had been occupied

¹ *A Statement of the Case of Brigadier General Joseph W. Revere* (New York, 1863).
³ Revere, *op.cit.*, Appendix V, 48.
since the preceding December. Apparently no one was in the mood to do any cleaning up. The correspondent for the New York Tribune reported on May 20th, "For miles around the country are scattered the carcasses of dead mules and horses, in various stages of decomposition, filling the air with their horrid stench; garbage rotting on the outskirts of every camp; the entrails of cattle slaughtered for food only half buried in the ground. . . . The camps are not fit to live in any longer not even for one day. . . ." Although the Surgeon-General's Office announced some improvement by June 7th, "the odors from dead matter around the camping ground of the 2d and 3d Army Corps have about entirely passed away," there was really no escape until the troops left Falmouth for the Gettysburg campaign on June 12th.

The Corps Hospitals around Potomac Creek and Falmouth were filled with sick and wounded. Once the campaign began these men had to be moved to Alexandria, Washington, Baltimore and Philadelphia since the area could no longer be defended. The large number of nearly-recovered convalescents, combined with the military manpower shortage, spurred the government to find some way to put the disabled veterans to work. General Order Number 105 dated April 28, 1863, created what was known in the beginning as the Invalid Corps. A few veterans signed up but the silly robin's egg blue uniform and the ridicule of the field troops were difficult burdens to bear. When the name was changed to the Veterans Reserve Corps and the regular field uniform was restored, more and more disabled men went from hospitals into the new Corps as a patriotic duty.

To be eligible for the Corps a soldier had to have come from a field command and been wounded in action or disabled by a disease contracted in service. Though unfit for arduous campaigning he had to be well enough to perform light military duties — garrison work, guarding prison camps, provost guard details at the draft offices and the like. That he was unfit for active field service but still fit for limited service had to be certified by a military medical officer, and his "character and meritoriousness" vouched for by his commanding officer.

A number of the Friend Rifles and Zouave Cadets took advantage of this opportunity to stay in the service. James Swan of the Cadets, who had been wounded at Chancellorsville, signed up in

5 New York Tribune, June 7, 1863.
September. Henry Bruce Sutherland, in hospital at Broad and Cherry Streets in Philadelphia, suffering from hernia, joined in August, as did Joseph C. Beck and Henry D. Taylor. Disabled Friend Rifles who volunteered were Joseph Flowers, Thomas McKeon, William A. Short and Andrew S. Keifer. Philip Ulrich was the lone representative from Susquehanna. Others, too sick to serve in any capacity, left the service. From the Zouave Cadets Augustus Beckert was sent home from a Washington hospital in May, Frederick Dithmar from a Philadelphia hospital in August and Charles Priest from one in Alexandria also in August. Samuel Watson of the Friend Rifles was discharged from an Alexandria hospital in September and Samuel F. Page transferred from the same unit to the U.S. Signal Corps in August. There were no replacements for these men and the ranks of the Pittsburgh companies were getting thinner and thinner.

The Excelsior Brigade, now commanded by Colonel William R. Brewster and still a part of the Second Division of Sickles' Third Corps, left the Falmouth camps on June 12th in search of Lee's army. The first day they reached Hartwood Church, and by the evening of June 13th were at Rappahannock Station. At two in the morning of June 14th four of the regiments were dispatched to Kelly's Ford where they remained until seven in the evening when they rejoined the Division at Rappahannock Station, only to be ordered forward to Catlett's Station for an all-night march. They had marched thirty-two miles and spent fourteen hours on picket duty without rest. Camp rumor held that all this was to keep their whereabouts secret but no one knew for sure. The next move was to Manassas Junction where Chaplain Twichell found the strength to write,

... How tired we are. Leaving Camp Sunday night [June 14th] we marched till eight o'clock next morning ... then halted under a boiling sun till half past one o'clock when the order to "Fall-in!" awoke us from noon-tide slumbers and started us on the way hither where we arrived at midnight thoroughly used up. All that heat, dust and forced marching could do to exhaust men we have endured ... I never witnessed such suffering from marching. The poor fellows lay stretched all along the road choaked and panting, and many a one was sunstruck ...  

After two days rest at Manassas Junction the Brigade moved on to Centreville and thence to Gum Spring, a "dilapidated village on the Leesburg Turnpike" which was reached on June 19th. Except for

7 Official Records, Series 1, Vol. 27, 558.
8 Twichell papers, op.cit., Chaplain Twichell's father had died April 16, 1863. From that date on, letters were to his mother and other members of the family. Letter to Mother June 16, 1863.
enemy guerilla action the six-day stay at Gum Spring was pleasant.\textsuperscript{9} The Excelsior regiments lay together encamped on a green field and there was little to do except the inevitable picket duty although, much to Chaplain Twichell's distress, foraging parties ranged the countryside stealing cattle and sheep and "anything eatable that came their way."\textsuperscript{10} The morning of the 25th saw the beginning of a grim day's march to the Potomac. By early evening the river was crossed at Edward's Ferry on pontoon bridges in a cold, driving rain.

The day's destination was the mouth of the Monocacy River, due south of Frederick, Maryland, and since the only available road was the tow path of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal the troops floundered through the clayey, sticky footing until midnight. They had marched fourteen hours without a halt of sufficient length to permit the brewing of a cup of coffee and many of the men had fallen by the wayside. Twichell chose to walk with the men, giving up his horse "to the fagged out little drummer boys, who perched on his neck by twos. I stuck them up as you would fasten clothes pins on a line..."\textsuperscript{11}

The troops had no idea where they were going. Twichell thought they were headed for Harper's Ferry but at Point of Rocks the Corps turned north, crossed the Catoctin mountains to Jefferson, then zigged and zagged through the towns of Middletown, Frederick, Walkersville, Woodsboro and Middleburg. The latter village was reached on June 29th. Here General Sickles received messages from General Meade rebuking him for the slowness of his movements, for holding up faster moving units in his rear and for having travelled no more than twelve miles in one day.\textsuperscript{12} By June 30th the Excelsior regiments were bivouacked for the night about six miles beyond Taneytown and to the east of Emmitsburg.

The early morning of July 1st found Sickles a disturbed and puzzled man. He had been ordered by General Meade to hold a position near Emmitsburg but the fighting had already begun at Gettysburg. Through an aide, Major Henry Tremain, Sickles received a verbal, counter order from General Reynolds, "Tell General Sickles I think he had better come up." Sickles waited. Later in the day he received an urgent message from General Howard, "General Reynolds..."\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{9} Warren H. Cudworth, \textit{History of the First Regiment Massachusetts Infantry} (Boston, 1866), 385.
\textsuperscript{10} Twichell, \textit{op.cit.}, June 26, 1863.
\textsuperscript{11} Twichell, \textit{op.cit.}, June 26, 1863.
\textsuperscript{12} Official Records, Series 1, Vol. 27, pt.3, 399 and 420.
is killed. For God’s sake come up.”  

There could be no more delay. Although the Third Corps now comprised only two divisions Sickles resolved his problem by leaving two brigades at Emmitsburg. Then, responding to the urgency of General Howard’s message, he started with his remaining 11,000 men toward Gettysburg.

The Excelsior Brigade had reached Emmitsburg early in the morning of July 1st. The regiments halted just outside the town to permit units of the First Corps to pass. Here they remained until after 3 o’clock in the afternoon when they again took up the march toward Gettysburg. By dark they had crossed Marsh Creek and proceeded to the west of the Emmitsburg Road where they halted. It was foragers who discovered how close their line of march was to that of the enemy. Seeing a light in the distance some hungry Excelsiors headed in that direction, hoping for a meal, only to find that rebel artillerymen had preceded them and were dining in style in the farmhouse. This intelligence caused the Brigade to change direction and return once again to the Emmitsburg Road. Sickles’ First Division had reached Gettysburg about 5:30 on July 1st. The Second Division, with the Excelsior Brigade, did not arrive on the scene until after midnight, in the early morning of July 2nd. It had taken nearly ten hours to cover the fourteen weary miles.  

The controversy over General Sickles’ disposition of his troops for the second day’s battle at Gettysburg has died down, though most military experts today think that he did the wrong thing. It is impossible to know for sure whether his men suffered more from his action than they would if he had obeyed General Meade’s directive. The Third Corps was supposed to form along the ridge with its right touching the left of the Second Corps and its left anchored on Little Round Top. Sickles felt that this position was an untenable one, that a much better position lay about 1000 yards forward toward the rise of the Emmitsburg Road. He ordered Colonel Berdan with his Sharpshooters and the Third Maine Regiment forward to reconnoiter. West of the Emmitsburg Road they encountered heavy enemy formations and a brisk and bloody skirmish resulted. Sickles determined to move.

His First Division, under General Birney, was to take a position facing southwest with the left of the line based on Devil’s Den and the right on the Emmitsburg Road at the Peach Orchard. The Second

14 Henri Le Fevre Brown, History of the Third Regiment, Excelsior Brigade (Jamestown, N.Y., 1902), 104.
Division under General Andrew A. Humphreys, which included the Excelsior Brigade, was to face the enemy looking west from the Emmitsburg Road, with its left joining Birney's men at the Peach Orchard and its right up in the air.

About 3 o'clock on the afternoon of July 2nd the Third Corps moved forward to the attack. Frank Haskell, an officer on the staff of General John Gibbon of the Second Corps, and one of Sickles' severest critics, had nothing but admiration for the gallant men of the Third Corps.

It was magnificent to see those ten or twelve thousand men — they were good men — with their batteries, and some squadrons of cavalry upon the left flank, all in battle order, in several lines, with flags streaming, sweep steadily down the slope, across the valley, and up the next ascent toward their destined position! From our position we could see it all. In advance Sickles pushed forward his heavy line of skirmishers, who drove back those of the enemy across the Emmitsburg Road, and thus cleared the way for the main body.15

Enemy batteries opened fire and were answered by those of Sickles while the infantry, protecting themselves in every possible way, lay under "the heaviest artillery fire the corps had ever experienced, for about one hour." 16 This was directed largely at the exposed salient of the Peach Orchard.

Then the Confederate infantry attacked. The Excelsiors, stretched along the line of the Emmitsburg Road, would have been annihilated had the enemy units been better coordinated. General William Barksdale's Mississippi brigade hit them on the left at the Peach Orchard; General Wilcox's Alabamians and General Perry's Floridians came at them across the Emmitsburg Road in the center, while General A. R. Wright's Georgians swept through and around their right flank;

... now the battle began; for amid the heavier smoke and larger tongues of flame of the batteries, now began to appear the countless flashes, and the long fiery sheets of the muskets, and the rattle of the volleys, mingled with the thunder of the guns. We see the long gray lines come sweeping down upon Sickles' front, and mix with the battle smoke; now the same colors emerge from the bushes and orchards upon his right, and envelope his flank in the confusion of the conflict.17

On the field itself the confusion was even worse than Haskell had observed from his point of vantage on Cemetery Ridge. Three times the Excelsiors changed front and rallied with the enemy

15 Frank Aretas Haskell, The Battle of Gettysburg (Boston, 1958), 38.
16 Henri Le Fevre Brown, op.cit., 104.
17 Haskell, op.cit., 41.
seemingly coming from every direction. Three different eyewitnesses described one heroic episode in three different ways. According to Colonel Brewster, commander of the Excelsior Brigade, he gathered a mixed group from all of his regiments and led the charge against General Perry's Florida brigade to recapture artillery taken by the Eighth Florida Regiment. Many prisoners were taken and forced to haul the recaptured cannons to the rear. Sergeant Thomas Horan of the Third Excelsiors took the Florida colors. 18 Henri Le Fevre Brown recalled that General Humphreys himself led the assault, assisted by Colonels Leonard of the Third and Burns of the Fourth Excelsior, and that he and Luther Howard of the Third were the first to reach the guns. 19

Felix Brannigan, speaking of the same incident, recalled that the sergeant of a battery belonging to the Brigade,

"... dashed along the line like an infuriated tiger and halted about the centre cried "Boys! you said you'd stick to us, (the battery), is this the way the brigade is going to leave the field? There's the Guns! (pointing over the rebel masses). If you're men, come on!" and with that he wheeled round, struck the spurs deep into his horse, and dashed into the enemy's disorganized ranks, his sword flashing like a meteor as his brawny arm laid about with mad recklessness. With one impulse the whole line yelled "Charge," and Hi... hi... hi... away we dashed after him, the colors of each little regiment full a dozen paces in advance... We were standing beside the guns mad with success before we were scarce aware we had started to do it... so unexpected was our charge that in pell mell flight (the rebels) had not time to carry off the battle flags of some of their best regiments which they had placed in victory over their trophies (the Guns) and they fell into our hands. Beside this we took about 1200 prisoners and what do you think we made them do... we took the reserve ropes and made the rebels take holt and haul [the Guns] off the field. 20"

The Excelsior Brigade, relieved by elements of the Twelfth Corps, retired after dark to the comparative safety of Cemetery Ridge. Now a spectator, Brannigan observed a terrific artillery duel. "It had grown dark and in the ebon atmosphere you could trace the fire by the burning fuses of the shell... fire illumined the valley of death..." 21 Only night ended one of the bloodiest battles of the war. "After the storm of battle became hushed the Ambulances were immediately sent in, and we could see them move slowly on their errands of mercy, by the line of red lights. Both sides became inter-

19 Henri Le Fevre Brown, op.cit., 105.
20 Brannigan, op.cit., undated letter fragment written near the Rappahannock, presumably in August, 1863.
21 Brannigan, op.cit., letter fragment August, 1863.
mingled in the good work. Union and Rebel were terms forgotten in the cause of humanity.”

Near 6:30 in the evening General Sickles had been wounded in the right leg by a cannon ball. Taken to the Trostle barn where an improvised tourniquet was applied, he turned his command over to General Birney and was removed by ambulance to the Third Corps tent hospital near the Taneytown Road. There his leg was amputated well above the knee. The military career of a highly controversial officer had come to an end. Brannigan felt that in this particular battle, at least, Sickles had been confused and that his Adjutant-General, Orson H. Hart, “was more collected than his superior,” which resulted in everyone becoming his own General. He also felt that the Confederate failure to press the attack — “They hesitated and their hesitation saved the day,” was all that prevented the annihilation of the badly-riddled Excelsior Brigade. General A. R. Wright of the Georgia Brigade concurred, insisting that the failure of General Perry’s Florida regiments prevented a Confederate victory.

Chaplain Twichell, however, expressed the conviction of most of the Excelsior soldiers, a conviction that was to last until there were no veterans left to debate the issue. “At a little before sunset the sad intelligence spread that General Sickles was wounded. He had been the master spirit of the day and by his courage, coolness and skill had averted a threatened defeat. All felt that his loss was a calamity.”

The Excelsior Brigade had gone into action with 1837 officers and men. Their casualties were 779. Captain John Downey of the Fourth Excelsiors, wounded in the thigh and held in a barn by the Mississippi Brigade, reported that 19 of the 45 men in his company were casualties.

The Pittsburgh companies, small to begin with, suffered comparable losses. Florence Berton of the Zouave Cadets was killed, as were John McLaughlin, John W. McMullen and George Serena. The wounded were George J. Bond, Nelson K. Campbell, Samuel G. Collins, George Dwyer, Philip Gotman, George Kimberly, George Little, Gotleib Luty, Richard McCaffrey, James McGowan, James W. Powelson and William Triplet.

22 Brannigan, op.cit., letter fragment August, 1863.
23 D. S. Freeman, Lee’s Lieutenants, Vol. 3 (New York, 1944), 126.
24 Brannigan, op.cit., August, 1863.
26 N.Y. Tribune, July 14, 1863.
Killed in the Friend Rifles were Samuel W. Croft, William Diper (or Piper), Matthew McGraw and James Montgomery. Thornton Jones died of his wounds on August 18th. William Brookmeyer was missing in action. Wounded were John Burke, John Dalgleish, Charles Franke, James P. Gelston, Benjamin M. Hall, John McClanhahan, Daniel Thompkins, William C. Wiley and Charles P. Woodey.

John M. Smith from Tidioute was killed; Edwin Hess died of wounds on July 10th and Cyrus A. Lehman on August 10th. George W. Coover and William R. Reck were wounded. Two Susquehanna boys died, John Jolliff in action and Sylvin A. Carlin of wounds on July 21st. Wounded were Edward Clayton and Levi Tripp.

For those who could remember the Excelsior regiments at the war's beginning the Gettysburg losses, added to those of earlier battles, were appalling. Twichell could only say, "... I grieve for our poor boys. We had none to spare and now can hardly be called a regiment." 27

On the third day of Gettysburg the Excelsiors, held in reserve in comparative safety in support of the Second and Fifth Corps, lost only three men to artillery fire. Brannigan, observing the action, felt that the battle was even more severe than the fighting of the second day. The Confederates, "... shattered upon the impregnable steel of the Army of the Potomac ... fell back into their entrenchments, preparing to recross the Potomac ..." He felt that Meade's delay in following the defeated enemy was the result either of poor generalship or political chicanery and he never lost faith in his idol, General Hooker, who, in his eyes, remained "A General and a patriot." 28

The Confederate army remained in their positions at Gettysburg all day on Saturday, the 4th of July. About noon heavy rains saturated the battlefield while the opposing armies glowered at each other. That night Lee began his withdrawal down the Fairfield Road and by the following morning the last of the Army of Northern Virginia had left Gettysburg.

The rain continued through Sunday, July 5th, and on this and the next day the Excelsior Brigade buried its dead and some of the enemy dead as well. Rude headboards were placed at each grave. The wounded were left with the surgeons in the temporary Third Corps Hospital until they could be moved to better quarters. On

27 Twichell, op.cit., July 5, 1863.
28 Brannigan, op.cit., August, 1863.
July 7th the Brigade started in pursuit of the enemy. The country was water-soaked, the roads were ditches and small brooks had turned into raging torrents. In spite of the hard going the troops reached Emmitsburg and moved on to Mechanicstown a few miles to the southwest where they bivouacked for the night. The people of the latter town, "a thriving village of some size," were Unionists who were pleased to share their meagre food supplies.29

The night of the 8th the regiments camped a little beyond Frederick. During the march the men had been cheered by the news of the fall of Vicksburg. The next day they turned toward the west and marched through Middletown and on beyond Fox Gap in the Catoctin mountains where they camped on the western side. Lee, prevented from crossing the Potomac by the swollen river, was backed up near Williamsport with his left flank on the Conococheague Creek and his right near Downsville.

General Prince assumed command of the Second Division of the Third Corps on July 10th, the day the Corps reached the old Antietam battlefield. Although the Excelsiors had not participated in that battle and by now were hardened campaigners they were moved by the debris of battle that was evident everywhere. The following day General F. B. Spinola was named commander of the Brigade and the regiments moved north to Boonsboro. Finally, on July 12th, they advanced to the front about two miles south of Funkstown. Here, near St. James College, once again they faced the enemy in line of battle, whose pickets could be seen on adjoining hills and in the groves of trees to the front. There was to be no battle. The Union command was undecided and on the night of the 13th by means of a rude bridge "of trees and timber" and by wading the still swollen river Lee's men escaped across the Potomac near Falling Waters. The only action was a bloody cavalry attack on the Confederate rear guard by the Sixth Michigan, but Lee's main army was untouched.30

Even the enlisted men were aware that an opportunity to crush Lee had been missed and there was little joy in the knowledge that another Virginia campaign was inevitable. There was not much reason for hurry but the Excelsior regiments were pushed forward rapidly to Sharpsburg on the 15th, to Pleasant Valley on the 16th, and by the 17th they were across the Potomac at Harper's Ferry once

29 Cudworth, op.cit., 407.
30 Cudworth, op.cit., 409.
again in a hostile and desolated country. Lee's line of retreat was
southward, west of the Blue Ridge mountains and the Shenandoah
River. Meade's pursuit was east of the mountains and the river
but close to the eastern base of the mountains so as to be within
easy reach of the gaps. The troops moved south through Hillsboro,
Woodygrove, Snickersville and on to Upperville which was reached
on July 20th. Here they rested until the 22nd when they moved on
to Piedmont. Meanwhile, Lee's army on the western side of the
range had reached a point opposite to Manassas Gap. Meade decided
to attack, and the Third Corps, now under General French, led the
way toward the Gap, the enemy and Front Royal.

Early in the morning of July 23rd the Third Corps started
its advance. At Linden Station on the Manassas Gap Railroad the
Sixth Excelsiors were detached for picket duty on the left of the
road. At Wapping Station, near the western entrance to the Gap, the
Confederates of General Hill's Corps were posted on eminences of
land known as Wapping Heights. The Union line of battle was
formed about 10 o'clock in the morning, strong skirmish lines were
sent forward, artillery was posted on the hills, but the well
entrenched Confederates were not intimidated. After sporadic fighting
in which other brigades of the Third Corps were pinned down, the
Excelsior Brigade was ordered to make a frontal attack on the enemy
works. At 5 o'clock the attack, with fixed bayonets, began;

My regiment [70th N.Y. with Friend Rifles] being on the left of the
brigade, moved at a double quick, in connection with the other four regiments,
under a severe fire from the enemy, and, arriving on the crest of the hill,
driving the enemy before us, we found the work but half done, the enemy
being in strength on two hills in front of us, the farthest being held by their
artillery. The brigade charged on . . . taking prisoners and carrying
all before it.31

The New York Tribune called this action of the Excelsiors
". . . one of the most gallant bayonet charges of the war." General
Spinola fell, seriously wounded, but the Brigade reached the crest of the
second hill, threw up breastworks, and held all of the ground it
had gained. The men remained on the alert that night and the next
morning, the 24th, at dawn the First Excelsior Regiment moved
forward to probe the enemy position only to find the works deserted.
The whole Brigade then advanced to within a mile of Front Royal.
Finding no opposition they retired to Markham Station about
twenty miles from Warrenton, where they rested.

The First and Fifth Excelsior regiments had suffered most in this engagement. Patrick C. Daly and Frank H. Smith of the Friend Rifles were killed, as were Robert Garrett, Charles McDevitt and Charles S. Preston of the Zouave Cadets. Charles Rochenderfer died of his wounds on August 1st. Robert H. Davis and Washington Patchen from Tidioute were wounded as was Michael Halloran of Susquehanna.

Most tragic, perhaps, was the death of Charles Seymour Preston. Badly wounded in the left arm at Chancellorsville by a minie ball (he gave the bullet as a souvenir to the Rev. Herrick Johnson of Pittsburgh's Third Presbyterian Church), he missed the Gettysburg campaign. Refusing to resign because of disability, he rejoined his regiment just before the engagement at Wapping Heights. He had a premonition of impending death and told his comrade, D. M. Watt, "that he had had a dream of a battle in which he was shot through the abdomen while his regiment was charging up a height." He told other friends that he would never return from the war and he met his death substantially as he had predicted. Only twenty-one, he had enlisted as a private and risen to the rank of captain at the time of his death though he was unaware that he had received the promotion.32

On July 25th and 26th the Third Corps moved at a leisurely pace toward Warrenton. On the 26th the Excelsiors went into camp in a lovely park about two miles beyond Warrenton on the road to Culpeper Court House. The next two months were to be spent in camp, on picket at the Rappahannock fords and along the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. On July 30th Henry McDonald of the Zouave Cadets deserted near Warrenton. Early in August Brannigan described some of the amenities of picket duty along the Rappahannock,

... if you could take a peep at us you would certainly say that the outposts of the two armies were on the most friendly terms. We don't carry our guns while on duty, but fix bayonets and plant them in the ground, muzzle down. We exchange our coffee with the rebs for their tobacco and papers are read aloud to groups of men fighting for opposite sides ... and we generally end by mutually wishing we had "let those who make the quarrels be the very first ones to fight."33

On September 24th Chaplain Twichell saw "... a poor wretch of the Third [Excelsior] drummed down the Brigade to the Rogues March with his head shaved, for striking an officer. I pitied the

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32 George T. Fleming, My High School Days (Pittsburgh, 1904), 138.
33 Brannigan, op.cit., August, 1863.
rascal although he looked funny with his brown face and white skull . . . " 34

There was much marching and countermarching for no one seemed to know the exact whereabouts of Lee’s forces. On September 15th the Excelsiors were sent to Fox’s Ford on the Rappahannock, then changed course toward Freeman’s Ford farther to the south. "Then commenced our tribulations. Through forests and morasses . . . . hedges and ditches, we groped, huddled and floundered . . . we emerged, not at the river crossing which was our quest, but upon the very field from which we had set out . . . ." 35 Eventually a ford was found and the river crossed so that the Brigade was able to camp within a mile of Culpeper after a fruitless twenty-mile hike.

On October 7th the Excelsior regiments left Culpeper and marched to the west toward James City “to observe the movements of the enemy.” At daybreak on the 8th word was received that the rebels were crossing a neighboring ford in force. The Sixth Excelsior was sent forward to support General Kilpatrick’s cavalry two miles beyond James City. On the 10th the Sixth Regiment was struck on both flanks and in the front by Stuart’s cavalry and was forced to retreat, skirmishing all the way. The regiment lost one killed, nine wounded and 102 missing. The following day, Sunday, all of the Excelsior regiments cooked seven days’ rations and moved northward.

Shortly after dark the troops crossed Hazel River on pontoons at Welford’s Ford and proceeded to the Rappahannock which was waded at Freeman’s Ford. Just before the crossing, while marching through dark woods, an alarm arose and “for a few minutes the panic was fearful.” 36 On October 12th the Brigade camped on Mrs. Moore’s farm on the Beverly Ford Road. The next day the whole division marched, in order of battle, north past Fayetteville to Three Mile Station on the Warrenton Branch R.R. which was reached at 3 o’clock in the afternoon. Just twelve hours later the weary troops reached Greenwich where they bivouacked for the night.

On the 14th the whole of the Union Third Corps turned toward Bristoe Station, crossed Broad Run above the railroad bridge and moved over the Manassas Plain toward Centreville. They were unaware that the Confederate Third Corps under General Hill was closely following, and were well to the north when Hill’s regiments

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34 Twichell, op.cit., September 28, 1863.
35 Twichell, op.cit., September 20, 1863.
36 Twichell, op.cit., October 15, 1863.
were severely battered by General Warren's Second Corps at Bristoe.

By the evening of the 14th the Excelsiors had forded Bull Run and were camped on high ground between Bull Run and Centreville. On the 15th the whole division was at Union Mills massed and ready for battle. The engagement at McLean's Ford on Bull Run, however, was fought by General Mott's brigade — the Excelsior Brigade was held in reserve. There had been a lot of walking and some danger since the gallant charge at Wapping Heights but only the Sixth Excelsior Regiment had seen any action.

For the Excelsiors the big event of a boring campaign was the arrival at Union Mills on October 17th of their old commander, General Sickles. The whole Second Division of the Third Corps was paraded in his honor,

... After some delay the General appeared mounted on a horse on which he sat like an emperor.... The moment he hove in sight the uproar commenced. It was thunderous. Enthusiasm begat excitement and excitement, wildness. Officers waved their swords and soldiers their caps, while cheer on cheer, huzzas, shouts and "tigers" swolled down the line.... like sea waves.... The old Brigade (Excelsior) strained its individual and collective lungs.... the last time he looked on our ranks was in the midst of the terrible bloody fighting at Gettysburg....

Like the king who marched his men up the mountain and down again in fruitless effort, so General Meade marched the Army of the Potomac, or at least so thought the men. The Excelsiors started south again on October 19th, south toward Bristoe, west toward Buckland's Mills, south again toward Greenwich and on to Catlett's Station. Much of the marching was in a cold, driving rain. Units were detached for picket duty and rear guard assignments but there was no contact with the enemy. By November 1st the Brigade was encamped in "a smooth, open field," near where the Orange and Alexandria Railroad crossed the Kettle Run.

The decision to force a crossing of the Rappahannock at Kelly's Ford had been made. The Excelsiors left their camps at Catlett's on November 6th and rejoined the Third Corps at Warrenton Junction. The Brigade reached the Ford at 3 p.m. — the First Division had already effected a crossing — and when the Excelsiors crossed at nightfall, took their position in line and threw out pickets, there was no resistance. That night they camped in a cornfield. When they pushed on the next morning after a hasty breakfast, there were no rebels in sight. The only casualty was George Rhinehart of the

37 Twichell, op.cit., October 18, 1863.
Zouave Cadets who was taken prisoner and who remained in a prison camp until the end of the war.

The Mine Run campaign began on November 26th, Thanksgiving Day, 1863. The Excelsiors, encamped near Brandy Station, were aroused at daybreak and ordered to cross the Rapidan River at Jacob's Ford, about eight miles to the southeast. The Brigade crossed on pontoons before dark, got lost and marched four miles over a wood road before they finally encamped about one mile from the Ford. By afternoon of the 27th they had advanced to the Orange Plank Road not far from Locust Grove, had met the enemy and driven forward a short distance. In this action the Excelsiors were used mostly in support of the First Brigade of their division, though the Third and Fifth Regiments did see some brisk action.

Charles M. Colvin of the Friend Rifles was taken prisoner and remained in enemy hands until April 21, 1865. William S. Brown, George B. Getzenger and James McGowan of the Zouave Cadets were wounded. William H. Brown of Tidioute died of his wounds on November 28th.

It rained hard on the 28th. Daylight revealed that the enemy had gone. The rain and mud made marching that day a test of endurance. Twichell was struck by the human quality of one tragic incident. Captain McDonough of the Third Excelsior Regiment had been killed the day before: " . . . his boys, anxious to have him sent home for burial, undertook to bring his body with them. It was a touching sight to see the noble fellows struggle along bearing the remains of their dead captain on a stretcher." 18

The division to which the Excelsiors belonged was detached for service with General Warren's Second Corps on November 29th and they had their work cut out for them to find him. The New Jersey Brigade skirmished ahead while the Excelsiors followed "an inch at a time" through the woods. By evening communication was established and the Brigade encamped in a beautiful grove of pine trees. Monday, the 30th, they took their position in the battle line in a "low, damp field," and held it all the next day. That night, December 1st, with the Fifth Excelsiors in the lead the Brigade marched to the Plank Road and on to Culpeper Mines Ford which they reached at two in the morning after a twenty-mile hike. They were on their way back to the old camp at Brandy Station and to the only winter quarters they would have. Here they were to stay until May 3, 1864.

38 Twichell, op.cit., December 3, 1863.
There were the usual alarms, unpleasant incidents and foul weather, but of most interest to the men was the excitement over the discussions about re-enlistment. The army could ill afford to lose large numbers of three-year veterans with a spring offensive just over the horizon, so a determined effort was made to keep as many of the men as possible. Twichell pointed out how deeply exercised the men were on the subject but he was proud of the reaction of the Excelsior Brigade. “Nearly half of our Brigade is mustered in anew . . . . It was a touching and glorious sight to see the war worn remnant — so large a part of it — that had survived the slaughter, lift the right hand and with uncovered head, swear to fight for three years more . . . .” 39

Between December 30th, 1863, and March 15, 1864, seventeen of the Friend Rifles made the decision to see the war through: Hugh Boyce, John C. Cox, James Crosbie, John Dalgleish, Benjamin Deniston, Charles Franke, James P. Gelston, Samuel Hays, Jack Lowstetter, John McClanhahan, Samuel McMasters, William McMillen, Frederick Rainbow, Lieutenant Harry Scandrett, Augustus R. Temme and John E. Walker. James Sweeney, who also re-enlisted, was killed in a railroad accident in Newark, New Jersey, while on veteran’s furlough, March 30, 1864.

Seven of the Zouave Cadets signed up: Henry Beurman, Felix Brannigan, Thomas Daft, Lieutenant Asa S. Mason, Richard McCaffrey, James McGowan and William A. Watt. They were joined by eleven from the Tidioute company: John W. Barber, William S. Brown, Oliver Byrley, Willard D. Carpenter, John Finney, Hugh H. Hannah, Amos F. Johnson, Charles A. Mullens, Wm. H. Newell, Washington Patchen and William Sloan. The Susquehanna boys were not involved since their enlistments had over a year to run.

The second big piece of news that winter was the dissolution of the Third Corps. On March 25, 1864, the old Excelsior Brigade became the Second Brigade of the Fourth Division of the Second Corps, and on April 30th the Eleventh Massachusetts and Eighty-Fourth Pennsylvania regiments were added to the six old regiments to give the unit brigade strength. Twichell noted the change with mixed feelings, “. . . our Corps is . . . . broken up and attached to the 2nd. We hate to part with the old organization, endeared by such glorious associations, but it can’t be helped.” 40

39 Twichell, op.cit., January 3, 1864.
40 Twichell, op.cit., March 27, 1864.
enlarged Second Corps was reviewed by General Grant at Brandy Station. Twenty-five thousand men, comprising all three arms of the service, paraded on a wide plain and made a grand display.

The Excelsior regiments, now a part of the Second Brigade under Colonel William Brewster in the Fourth division commanded by General Gershom Mott of the Second Corps, received their marching orders at Brandy Station on the morning of May 3, 1864. They marched through Madden and Richardsville and then turned south to Ely's Ford on the Rapidan, which they crossed at daylight on the 4th. That afternoon they bivouacked briefly at Chancellorsville, but by six o'clock they were south of the Orange Plank Road busily building defensive breastworks. By early morning of May 5th they were at Catherine Furnace, marching toward the intersection formed by Brock and Furnace Roads. The Second Corps had been ordered to attack northward across the Orange Plank Road. The Excelsior Brigade was formed in two lines on the left or south flank of the Corps. To their immediate right was the First Brigade of their division, commanded by Colonel George McAllister.41

There is no way of knowing at this late date what happened exactly, nor the causes. The only official Excelsior report is that of Colonel Michael Burns of the Fourth Regiment. He states that the first Excelsior line, heavily attacked by enemy infantry, gave way and that the second line advanced about one-quarter mile to its support. After about fifteen minutes of the fiercest combat, they encountered the enemy curling around their left flank and were forced to retreat which they did in good order.42 Most of the evidence comes from other regimental accounts. The experience of the First Massachusetts Regiment, to the immediate right, must have paralleled that of the Excelsiors. The men had advanced some 500 yards from the road, creeping slowly through thick underbrush, when they were met unexpectedly by a double volley of musketry. This they could return "but feebly," before another hail of bullets drove them back. "Along the whole division line, the movement became at once rapidly retrograde."43

The brutal truth seems to be that the Excelsior Brigade broke under the vicious attack of General Henry Walker's Virginia Brigade and that in so doing they imperiled their whole line and may

43 Cudworth, op. cit., 461.
have stymied the attack of their own Second Corps. These men had been the best combat troops in the army. If anything can be said in extenuation it is that with their old Corps dissolved, the aggressive leadership of generals such as Hooker, Sickles and Humphreys removed, the attrition of three years of war and the psychological factor of being only two months removed from the expiration of their service, the fighting heart could well have gone out of them.

The shaken Excelsior regiments reformed in the rear behind the Brock Road in previously prepared breastworks and here they remained all of the night of May 5th. The next morning the battle commenced anew and once again, under a Confederate attack six lines deep consisting mostly of General Wm. T. Wofford's Georgia Brigade, General Mott's unlucky division, with the Excelsior Brigade, was forced back in disorder. This was in the morning. In the afternoon the regiments formed behind their defenses and waited. Forest fires had been raging for some time. Soon the slashings before the breastworks caught fire and in no time the works themselves were blazing. "The logs caught fire; the defenders backed steadily away, holding their alignment in a desperate effort to sustain the defense of their burning rampart. Then through the blinding smoke and flame poured a torrent of flashing bayonets . . . " 44 Once again the Excelsiors wavered, then broke and the panic was catching. Fire had contributed the last straw to their demoralization.

On May 7th the Excelsiors were held in reserve to regroup. Twichell wrote hastily, "Terrible fighting, but rather in our favor so far. I am safe but hundreds of poor fellows lie dead on the field or groaning about me with the pain of mangled bodies. It is not over yet. God save the Union . . . ." 45 Even the chaplain was whistling to keep up his courage. Despite the intensity of the action the Pennsylvania companies suffered few casualties. William McKee of the Friend Rifles was wounded. Daniel Thomkins, on detached duty, was captured and remained a prisoner until his escape in April 1865. Jacob Young of the Zouave Cadets was captured and paroled February 26, 1865. Edward Gilbert from Susquehanna was captured and Daniel Lawson was missing. Charles Russell of Tidioute was wounded.

During the afternoon of May 7th the Excelsiors moved north of the Orange Plank Road in support of units of General Burnside's

44 Steete, op.cit., 425.
45 Twichell, op.cit., May 7, 1864.
Ninth Corps and skirmished most of that night. On the 8th and 9th they were in the vicinity of Todd’s Tavern near the Brock Road, mostly occupied with the building of earthworks. An enemy attack was expected and they were to hold the Catharpin Road at this point but the battle never materialized. The afternoon of the 9th they were ordered to the left of General Sedgwick’s Sixth Corps. The 10th of May they might have covered themselves with glory, but once again were made to look bad. Who is to know what part faulty leadership played in their failure? They were scheduled to support the brilliant experimental attack of Colonel Emory Upton on the heavily fortified Confederate salient in front of Landron’s Farm.

The first line, Colonel McAllister’s First Brigade, and the second line, the Excelsior Brigade, moved forward to the attack, about 6 o’clock in the afternoon. They were behind schedule. Once in the open they were exposed to heavy enfilading fire from enemy artillery which had been watching their badly concealed preparations. Unable to stand up to the cannonading the attack stopped almost as soon as it started. As a result Colonel Upton’s successful penetration of the enemy lines, lacking support, came to nothing.46 Peter B. Giott of the Zouave Cadets was wounded in this action as was Samuel Patton, who died of his wounds on May 31st. Wm. G. Ritchie of the Friend Rifles had been captured the day before and was not paroled until April 26, 1865.

In the battle for the salient at Spotsylvania, better known as the Bloody Angle, which occurred on May 12th, the Excelsiors recovered some of their lost glory. They were in reserve as the regiments moved from Brown’s house at midnight on May 11th, and they followed General Birney’s men when the salient was smashed; 30 stands of colors, 18 cannon and about 4000 prisoners were taken. Private Philip Schlacter of the Fourth Excelsior regiment captured the colors of the 15th Louisiana regiment and Sergeant Wm. Jones of the same regiment took the flag of the 65th Virginia. Both men were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for the exploit. Joseph Reese of the Friend Rifles and George Little of the Zouave Cadets were wounded.

From the 12th of May to the 19th the Excelsior Brigade was busy strengthening the captured Confederate works near Landron’s Farm and skirmishing. The front was fluid and there was danger

everywhere. On the 17th Richard McCaffrey of the Zouave Cadets was wounded and Wm. R. Botsford of the Friend Rifles was captured, to be held prisoner until March 16, 1865. The Excelsiors had now become the Fourth Brigade of General Birney's Third Division of the Second Corps. On May 19th they moved from Landron's Farm, crossed the Po River, and camped near Anderson's Mill. 47

A crossing of the North Anna River was forced on May 23rd and on the 24th abandoned enemy positions at Fox House were occupied. The next day the enemy entrenchments in the immediate front were reconnoitred and found to be impregnable. William McKee of the Friend Rifles was again wounded. The action at Cold Harbor on May 31st was briefly mentioned by Twitchell. "Our brigade was somewhat engaged ... brave little Charlie Bennett [color sergeant] was killed . . . . The other regiments did not fare so well . . . . Sergt. Major Whittaker of the 1st . . . was instantly killed. The Excelsior Brigade is near its end — the end of a brilliant career. In three weeks the term of service of such as did not re-enlist will expire. I shall then be free . . . ." 48 In this action Captain James Hill of Tidioute and Michael Halloran of Susquehanna were wounded. The next day Richard McCaffrey of the Zouave Cadets was killed.

The war had come very nearly a full cycle for the survivors in the Excelsior Brigade. Early in June they marched from Cold Harbor, north of Richmond, to Charles City Court House, on the Peninsula. They were there on June 13th and from that point they proceeded to about six miles below Harrison's Landing (from which point they had taken off for the Second Bull Run campaign). All of the old familiar places when the war was new and spirits high came back to haunt them. The James River was crossed on troop transports and the Brigade entered the lines before Petersburg. Here they occupied exposed positions and faced very heavy artillery fire and a number were killed and wounded. Joseph Gion of the Zouave Cadets was one of the wounded on June 17th. Twitchell was moved to say, "It looks as though little would be left to must out when our term expires." 49

Fortunately, many did survive. Forty-one of the Zouave Cadets were mustered out of the service on July 21, 1864, near Petersburg.

47 Walker, op.cit., 469.
48 Twitchell, op.cit., June 1, 1864.
49 Twitchell, op.cit., June 19, 1864.
Those who had re-enlisted were assigned to the 40th Infantry Regiment. Seventeen of the Friend Rifles received their discharges in New York City on July 1, 1864. Those who continued in service were transferred to the 86th Infantry Regiment. They had served well and faithfully, but certainly many of the men must have agreed with Chaplain Twichell. Now they were free.

In 1890, forty-six of the former Zouave Cadets were still alive. Most of the men had remained in Pennsylvania but some were scattered through New York, Massachusetts, Ohio, West Virginia and as far west as Michigan. Still, they retained something of the camaraderie of the war years and seemed to feel a compulsion to keep in touch with one another. No one but themselves could share the experiences that had meant so much when they were young and continued to have meaning now that they were old.

APPENDIX

Company 'A'
Seventy-Fourth New York Volunteer Infantry
Fifth Excelsior Regiment
(Pittsburgh Zouave Cadets)

Surviving members of the Company — circa 1890. It is not certain that all of these men were alive at the time.

*Abbey, John
Bausman, Francis R.
Beurman, Henry G.
Billings, Henry W.
Billings, William
Bingeh, John H.
Brannigan, Felix
Brown, William S.
Byington, George
Campbell, James
Casey, John Henry
Collins, Samuel

Gloversville, N.Y.
Pittsburgh, Pa.
Pittsburgh, Pa.
Boston, Mass.
Allegheny City, Pa.
Pittsburgh, Pa.
Washington, D.C. Att'y-General's Office
Masillon, Ohio
Allegheny City, Pa.
Pittsburgh, Pa.
Pittsburgh, Pa.
Collins, William  
Craney, John P.  
De Zouche, William  
*Dunlap, R.  
Estep, James  
Franklin, James S.  
Getzinger, George B.  
Giot, Peter  
Hemphill, John W.  
*Hepworth, W. H.  
Hughes, Daniel  
Lutton, John R.  
Luty, Gotlieb  
McNally, John B.  
*Miller, Charles  
Miller, Milton B.  
Murray, William  
Oates, Alfred K.  
O’Neal, William  
Patchell, Thomas  
Patterson, Thomas J.  
Patton, James  
Perman, William H.  
Powelson, James W.  
Presser, William H.  
Robertson, Archibald C.  
*Robinson, S. M.  
*Romer, I. J.  
Schuck, Louis  
Scott, Robert  
*Sperry, William M.  
Sutherland, Henry Bruce  
Swan, James  
*Thompson, William  
Tyler, Francis E.  
Verner, Andrew J.  
Verner, John J.  
*Walls, Andrew  
Watt, David M.  
Whitesides, George  

Warren, Indiana  
Pittsburgh, Pa.  
Dun & Bradstreet  
Erie, Pa.  
Pittsburgh, Pa.  
Washington, D.C.  
QM-General’s Office  
Barnesville, Ohio  
Avenue, Pa.  
Tarentum, Pa.  
Tonawanda, N.Y.  
Camden, Allegheny County, Pa.  
Leechburg, Pa.  
Emsworth, Pa.  
Wellsburg, West Virginia  
Franklin, Pa.  
Chicago, Illinois  
Redman Mills, Pa.  
Pittsburgh, Pa.  
Pittsburgh, Pa.  
Pittsburgh, Pa.  
Pittsburgh, Pa.  
Allegheny City, Pa.  
Toledo, Ohio  
Pittsburgh, Pa.  
East Saginaw, Michigan  
Allegheny City, Pa.  
La Salle, N.Y.  
Tonawanda, N.Y.  
Pittsburgh, Pa.  
Pittsburgh, Pa.  
Titusville, Pa.  
Pennsylvania R.R.  
Pittsburgh, Pa.  
Allegheny City, Pa.  
Chattanooga, Tenn.  
Pittsburgh, Pa.  
Pittsburgh, Pa.  
Englewood, Illinois  
Pittsburgh, Pa.  
Pennsylvania R.R.
*Young, Brooke
Young, Jacob
Young, William A.

Pittsburgh, Pa.
Allen, Indiana
Pittsburgh, Pa.

This list of former comrades was in the possession of Henry Bruce Sutherland.

It is not known whether those marked (*) were in the original Company B of the Pittsburgh Zouave Cadets. They may have come in later as replacements. Lieutenant Isaac H. Ballard (Bullard), for instance, was a member of the Cambridgeport, Massachusetts, company that became Company D of the 74th N.Y. Volunteer Infantry. He received his discharge September 18, 1862.