

A BRIEF HISTORY OF COMPANY A 139th REGIMENT, PENNSYLVANIA VOLUNTEERS

EDWARD N. McCONNELL

WHEN war broke out in April 1861, the people of Western Pennsylvania were ready to take a firm stand against the dissolution of the Union by force. Pennsylvania came forward in response to a presidential call for troops by providing two companies of the Pennsylvania Reserve Corps to protect the southern frontier of the state. Once the conflict was in progress these units were often incorporated into the regular volunteer regiments and sent into battle.

By the late summer of 1862, the Union army was in dire need of reinforcements. To answer this need the 139th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers, was recruited in Western Pennsylvania and was composed of ten companies: Company A from Mercer County; B and C companies from Armstrong County; D, E, F, G, J, and K companies principally from the cities of Pittsburgh and Allegheny and Allegheny County; and Company H from Beaver and Allegheny counties.¹

Company A was organized from citizen volunteers in Mercer County on August 11, 1862, and reported to Camp Howe, near Pittsburgh, on the fifteenth. It was the first fully operational company to report for duty.²

The rank and staff of Company A were furnished mainly from Delaware, Fairview, and Wolf Creek townships and the area around New Lebanon, Mercer, Hamburg, and Leesburg. When it came into service the officers of Company A were: Captain Abraham H. Snyder from Mercer, 1st Lieutenant A. C. Douglass and 2nd Sergeant William S. Leech of New Lebanon, 1st Sergeant John Orr of Leesburg, 2nd Lieutenant McClane Thorn of Mercer, 1st Corporal E. C. Grace of Worth Township, and 4th Sergeant James P. McKean of

This article was written by a senior student for the chairman of the history department of Thiel College, Donald W. Whisenhunt. Mr. McConnell, of Niagara Falls, New York, has ambitions to be a professional historian.—Editor

1 Samuel P. Bates, ed., *History of the Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-65*, 5 vols. (Washington, D. C., 1870), 4: 378.

2 Muster Book of the 139th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers, A. H. Snyder Papers, Mercer County Historical Society, Mercer, Pa.

Mercer.³ Also mustered in at this time was Jonathan E. Beil, the son of David and Mary Ann Beil of Hamburg.⁴

The surviving papers of Abraham H. Snyder and Jonathan E. Beil, two members of Company A, add a great deal to the history of this company. The letters and documents reveal not only the military activities of the company but also the human side of the war — the conditions of life and personal feelings of individuals.

After being mustered into the army, the new recruit usually received several weeks of training in his home town before being sent into battle. Often he would drill up to six or eight hours a day.⁵ John Beil received training similar to other soldiers but in a slightly different way. By September 1, 1862, the entire 139th Regiment was organized and ready for action. It was ordered to the front immediately, leaving Pittsburgh on the evening of the first. On September 2, the troops received arms at Harrisburg and were shipped immediately to Washington. On the fourth, the regiment marched to the battlefield at Bull Run where under a flag of truce, they buried 1,799 federal soldiers killed during the fight.⁶ By this time the bodies had been lying in the summer sun for several days and were in terrible condition.

Upon completion of this task, Company A, along with the rest of the 139th Regiment, marched to Antietam. It arrived on September 17, 1862, and was put in the line but did not become actively engaged in the battle. The Confederate forces retreated the next day with the Army of the Potomac in pursuit. On September 20, Company A engaged in a skirmish near Williamsport, Virginia. This was the first time that Company A was involved in actual fighting with Southern troops.

When the 139th Regiment was incorporated into the United States Army it was assigned to the Third Brigade under Gen. Albion Howe and the Third Division commanded by Major Gen. Darius Couch of the Sixth Corps.⁷

John Beil described the training he received near Downsville, Maryland, in an account of the daily routine. After breakfast the soldiers dressed and had regimental and company drills. After sundown they had company drills again with little else to break up the humdrum of military training.⁸

3 Muster Book.

4 Bates, 379.

5 Francis A. Lord, *They Fought for the Union* (Harrisburg, 1960), 25.

6 Regimental Diary, Snyder Papers.

7 Regimental Diary.

8 John to Father, Sep. 28, 1862, Beil Collection, Mercer County Historical Soc.

Soon after the regiment's incorporation into the United States Army, Captain A. H. Snyder of Company A found time to send letters home to his family while in winter camp near New Baltimore, Virginia. In a letter to his son Karl, written that November, he explained the organization of the United States Army. The army was composed, he said, of six hundred thousand to one million men, divided into fourteen or fifteen corps commanded by a major general. Each corps was divided into divisions under the command of a major or brigadier general. The divisions, in turn, were subdivided into brigades headed by a brigadier general. Every brigade was further divided into regiments led by a colonel. Then each regiment was broken down into companies under the command of a captain.

In his letters Snyder gave a good indication of how the average man felt about the war. Snyder said over and over again that war should be avoided, but he wanted his son to know that he believed that the war he was fighting was right, because he placed the unity and independence of the United States above all else. He hoped that his son would never have to fight in a war, but he reminded him that he should always be ready to make a sacrifice for his country.⁹

After temporary winter encampment, which lasted from the middle of November until early December, the regiment became involved in the battle of Fredericksburg. Company A was used to support a battery and was not directly engaged in the fighting. It did come under heavy artillery fire, however, and suffered thirteen wounded from enemy shells. Upon completion of this battle Company A went back into winter encampment until April 28, 1863.¹⁰

John Beil made reference in one of his letters to the winter quarters that the enlisted men had at Harper's Ferry. These were log cabins, eight feet-by-ten feet-by-six feet, equipped with wooden floors and fireplaces. These cabins were not the rule in the army, and conditions varied.

While in winter camp, a few of the members of Company A received promotions. Captain A. H. Snyder was raised to major on January 31, 1863, and 1st Lieutenant A. C. Douglass was promoted to captain. First Sergeant John Orr was promoted to 1st Lieutenant February 1, 1863. William S. Leech was promoted from 2nd Sergeant to 2nd Lieutenant, and 2nd Lieutenant McClane Thorn was made

9 A. H. Snyder to Karl Snyder, Nov. 10, 1863, Snyder Papers.

10 Regimental Diary.

quartermaster on the same day.¹¹ John Beil earned the rank of sergeant, but the date of his promotion is uncertain.

In the Chancellorsville campaign the 139th Regiment was assigned to Major Gen. Frank Wheaton's brigade. The 139th was ordered to remain in reserve while the 93rd and 102nd regiments drove the enemy from positions on the heights near Fredericksburg. These heights were taken on May 2, 1863, and Company A, along with the rest of the 139th, was moved to Salem Church where it was to support the 93rd and 102nd. These regiments were so heavily engaged that the 139th was brought actively into the fighting. For some time an unequal contest was maintained, and the enemy troops, who had occupied a ravine to the rear of the Union troops, were driven out by well-directed fire of these regiments. On the following day Company A, with the rest of the 139th Regiment, occupied an important position on the front line and could not be relieved when the rest of the brigade retired that night to the junction of Main and Bank's Ford roads. The Confederate forces then moved on the flank of the Sixth Corps, near Fredericksburg, forcing the 139th to retire toward Bank's Ford. Finally, on the night of Monday, May 4, 1863, the division recrossed the river.

The 139th Regiment suffered very heavy casualties, as did every regiment in Wheaton's brigade. The 139th Regiment lost 123 men killed and wounded during the battle.¹²

Shortages of supplies were common in the Union army. In his letters home John Beil constantly made requests for money to purchase needed items. He quoted some prices of goods such as butter which cost fifty-to-sixty cents per pound, and eggs were the same price per dozen. Both of these items were hard to obtain. Whiskey by the quart cost \$2.50 to \$3.00. Ale and cider were \$1.00 per bottle. Beil said that the officers spent much of their time hunting down whiskey. He also asked for shoes and socks in his letters because the government issue of these items was of very poor quality and never lasted long.¹³

During the early part of June 1863, Company A was involved in building fortifications in the area around Franklin's Ford. Once Lee's army started to move north the Sixth Corps followed, leaving Fredericksburg on June 14. For two weeks the Sixth Corps shadowed Lee and on July 1 was thirty miles from Gettysburg when it received orders to march to the battlefield. The 139th, including Company A,

¹¹ Muster Book

¹² Bates, 379.

¹³ John to Father, Feb. 4, 1864.

Camp Hamilton Va. / Feb 28th 1864

Mr & Mrs. Seely.

Dear Mother,

Your favor of 23rd inst has come to hand & finding myself in usual health our news are nothing of any importance I have been at Harper's Ferry for the last twenty four hours guarding Federal & Confederate Prisoners. We had a review this evening at which the brass band was present. There are great many Officers women here on a visit. and therefore our Officers puts on a great many military airs or style. Tomorrow we will be mustered again for two ^{months} pay.

We have the most beautiful camp
ever I saw the location of the
land is sloping and very dry
and a magnificent sight from
the surrounding mountains
we have a powerfull sight of
duty to perform here but
my hopes are that we may
stay here this summer, I
would sooner put up with more
or less duty ~~to~~ and remain here
for the coming campaign I
like every thing ~~but~~ in a soldiers
life but those long heavy marches
they are pretty rough especially
the Gettysburg marches (for a specimen)
I wish you was here tomorrow to see
us go through the proceedings
of mustering inspection and passing
in review with arms and accoutrements
as bright as gold, in the frontier
army there is not as much military

Style as at there Commanding Post here the Soldier has the opportunity Keeping his arms and accoutrements in good condition and also his person.

By last night's mail I Received the shirt and socks the shirt could not be bought for five dollars here also the P.O. came same and sound, I saw to days paper ~~that says~~ that the Soldiers pay is to advance to range from 16 @ 25 Dollars per month I had a letter from brother William a few days ago he is enjoying his usual health. I have written to you at least five or six times about a memorial of our Company showing the members names of the Co. and discharged Soldiers Killed wounded when and where in action all those particular things I sent it when at

Brandy Station I would not have
it lost for a good deal

It seems that you for get every
time you write be sure that you
state something about it in your
next letter

Wm L. Loom

Your Son
Philip

Harper Ferry
Va.

arrived at Gettysburg on July 2 and was at once placed in support of the Third and Fifth corps, forming the extreme left part of the Union line. It advanced over the open ground to the right of Little Round Top and was actively engaged in the battles in the wheatfield and peach orchard. Company A, with the rest of the 139th Regiment, was instrumental in checking the advance of the Confederate forces during the crucial second day at Gettysburg. On the following day the 139th Regiment was withdrawn a short distance, where it remained until the close of the battle.¹⁴ The casualties for Company A during the fighting were one dead and several wounded. The regiment's total casualties were four dead and sixteen wounded out of 511 men who participated in the fighting.¹⁵

When he had time for other things Beil often expressed his political views. He was particularly interested in the draft as a letter to his father from Camp Copeland in August 1863 showed: "It seems the draft is going very slow at least not more than twenty report per day. It will take a long time if they don't report faster. I seen a list of the draft in Mercer Whig nearly 9 hundred I don't know that one third of them will come through." Captain Snyder never indicated in his letters where he stood on the draft issue.

To the enlisted man during the war food was of paramount concern. There have been many stories about the quality of the food, but the men of the Union army had much better food than that of the soldiers of previous wars.

Beil made reference to Gen. Joseph Hooker as a good provider of food. Beil referred to Hooker's replacement by George Meade — "Old General Meade is going to do his best. We like him pretty well as a fighting General but Old Joe beat him in keeping the rations." This opinion is verified by Bell Irwin Wiley who states that Hooker gave the troops better food when he received command from Ambrose Burnside.¹⁶

After Gettysburg, Company A participated in the pursuit of Lee's army and was engaged in a few minor battles at Rappahannock Station and Mine Run. The company was then detached from Wheaton's brigade and sent to winter camp at Harper's Ferry in late December 1863.¹⁷

¹⁴ Bates, 380.

¹⁵ *Pennsylvania at Gettysburg; Ceremonies at the Dedication of the Monuments* (Harrisburg, 1904), 2: 1123.

¹⁶ Bell Irwin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank; The Common Soldier of the Union* (New York, 1952), 226-27.

¹⁷ Bates, 380.

Following the battle of Gettysburg Snyder once again found time to write home to his son Karl. This letter answered some of the questions he believed his son might have about the everyday life of a typical soldier of Company A. The daily diet of the men on the march consisted of coffee, sugar, hard bread, and salt pork. When the men were encamped their issue of rations was supplemented with beans, rice, potatoes, and a loaf of soft bread. The men received enough rations for three days at a time.

The soldiers also had to forage for food, and some men even drove cattle along on the march and butchered them to have fresh meat. Any soldier who came upon a stray chicken, pig, or sheep usually killed it, or if they passed a farm they often tried to buy animals from the farmers. Some men even resorted to stealing animals if the farmers refused to sell. Snyder thought this practice was deplorable.

According to Snyder, since the men had no tables from which to eat they set blankets on the ground and ate on them. The foot soldier in the Civil War had a very hard life. He was expected to carry all the things he needed to live and to fight with on his back. This included guns, ammunition, food, clothes, and his personal items.

In the same letter Snyder again expressed his feelings about the war. He placed the blame for the war not on the Southern people but on a handful of politicians who had led the people astray. He tried to dispel the talk his son might have heard about the South wishing to live in peace by citing the battle of Gettysburg and the attempted invasion of the North.

The man's acute loneliness began to show through more than in his previous letters. He told his son to be kind to his mother and always to be obedient to make her life easier. He missed his family and wished he could be home with them. In all his letters he made reference to if "we all may be spared by our Heavenly Father and permitted to see each other."¹⁸ He feared death would take him from his family, and as time went on he became more preoccupied with that feeling.

John Beil's letters supported Snyder's observations of the living and food conditions of the enlisted soldiers. Recreation was a big problem for the common soldiers. It included reading, cockfights, letter writing, boxing, singing, and drinking. Families were able to visit troops which eased some of the loneliness. Beil, in one of his letters, sent directions for his father to visit him in camp at Wallstown, Virginia. There were also constant references that John was able

18 A. H. Snyder to Karl Snyder, July 22, 1863.

to visit his brother William who was in Company K of the Eighty-third Regiment.

Due to the lack of women at parties, men would tie handkerchiefs around their arms to indicate that they were taking the place of women. John Beil indicated this by reference to a New Year's Eve party he attended with the New York Forty-fourth Regiment at the Soldier's Retreat in Washington, D. C.

At no point in any of the letters did either Snyder or Beil make reference to the fact that they knew or came into contact with one another. This seems strange, for the size of the company was not so large as to cut the officers off from contact with the men. Probably the reason for it was that as the war progressed Snyder increased in rank and became further detached from the men, having a captain and lieutenant under him to give orders to the men instead of doing it himself.

Winter camp ended during the middle of March 1864, and the regiment rejoined the Sixth Corps at Brandy Station, where it was transferred from the Third Division to the Second Division.¹⁹

A number of new recruits were added to the regiment during the winter bringing the regiment to nearly its original strength. The Second Division, which included Company A of the 139th Regiment, was moved from winter quarters to participate in the Wilderness campaign of late spring 1864. The Second Division was separated from the rest of the corps soon after crossing the Rapidan River and was ordered to take positions at the junction of the Brock and Plank roads.²⁰ They were ordered to hold until the Second Corps returned from its march southward. While the Second Division was moving forward through the woods, the division was attacked. The 139th Regiment was on the front line and was the first to receive fire from enemy units. The fighting continued during the afternoon and was very severe. The next day Longstreet's corps was repulsed by a breast-work thrown up along Brock Road with a great amount of casualties. The 139th Regiment lost 196 men killed and wounded including nearly every commissioned officer. Major A. H. Snyder and Lieutenant E. C. Grace were among the killed. Major Snyder was mounted, acting as lieutenant colonel, and while leading an attack was struck by a Confederate bullet directly in the forehead and was killed instantly. Jonathan E. Beil was also killed by enemy fire, possibly while par-

¹⁹ Bates, 380.

²⁰ Lt. Col. Robert N. Scott, ed., *War of the Rebellion*, 1st ser. (Washington, D. C., 1891), 33: 68.

ticipating in the attack that Snyder died leading. With the deaths of Snyder and Beil the accurate records of personal experiences in the Second Division were ended.

Company A continued its service in the battle at Spotsylvania Courthouse from May 8 until May 21 but did not have a very active part in the fighting. At Cold Harbor, Company A sustained a much higher casualty rate and lost more of its officers than in the previous fight.

In July, the Sixth Corps was ordered to Washington, D. C., to meet Gen. Jubal Early who was advancing through Maryland. Early was easily turned back once confronted with federal forces, but no decisive victory was won until Gen. Philip Sheridan took over the Union forces. The 139th Regiment was involved in the battles at Winchester, Fisher's Hill, and Cedar Creek where they captured large stores of guns and ammunition plus many prisoners. In the action at Cedar Creek, Lieutenant James P. McKean of Mercer was killed. In this triumphant campaign, brilliant in victories beyond any other during the war, the 139th Regiment bore an honorable part, attesting its bravery by severe losses in every field.

On December 1, 1864, the 139th returned to Petersburg and spent a quiet winter in the lines before the city. On March 25, 1865, the Confederates attempted to force the Union lines at Fort Stedman, and a counter move was ordered along the entire front to determine if there was any material weakness in the Southern line. The 139th Regiment was once again sent into battle and carried the enemy's outer works, but they were thrown back by stronger fortifications behind the front lines. The purpose of its mission was accomplished, however.

After the abandonment of Petersburg and the retreat of the enemy, the Sixth Corps pushed on to support General Sheridan, who was straining every nerve to intercept the Confederate army and prevent its escape. At Sailor's Creek it came up with the cavalry and stern fighting ensued, but the enemy was finally forced to surrender. The Federals captured General Ewell and a large part of his corps. A few days later the entire Confederate army surrendered. Subsequently, the regiment moved with other troops to the North Carolina border to the support of Sherman. Soon after, Gen. Joseph Johnston surrendered and hostilities ceased. The 139th Regiment returned by the way of Richmond to the Washington, D. C., area, where, on June 21, 1865, it was mustered out of the service.²¹

²¹ Bates, 380-82.