

PITTSBURGH VOLUNTEERS WITH SICKLES' EXCELSIOR BRIGADE

PART 2

FROM WILLIAMSBURG TO SECOND BULL RUN

BRUCE SUTHERLAND

MILITARILY, the part played by Hooker's Division in the Battle of Williamsburg may have served little purpose. It is possible that the Confederate position could have been turned by General Hancock's attack on the right. General McClellan seemed to think so and the early official reports of the battle gave Hancock all the credit. The whole affair was really a costly skirmish rather than a battle, but members of the Excelsior Brigade, with four of their five regiments engaged and 772 of their men failing to answer roll call on the night of May 5th¹ would never admit this. For them the battle had turned miscellaneous companies of men into fighting regiments of a fighting brigade and they gave themselves and Hooker and Sickles (even though he had not been there) full credit for the transformation.

This can be sensed in some of the accounts written on the spot. As soon as the Second Excelsiors, on duty at Ship Point, heard of the battle in progress, they insisted on being permitted to join their comrades in arms. They arrived only in time for the aftermath but Chaplain Joseph Twichell expressed their sense of shock. "The slain unburied . . . lay in heaps. I shall remember it long."² James Stevenson of the First Excelsiors, whose regiment had suffered the greatest losses, thought that the gallantry of the Brigade would prove a "death-blow to those who were the enemies of General Sickles" and then went on to describe the scene as it appeared on the beautiful morning following the fight:

The dead and dying were lying in heaps, and no matter in what direction the eye turned, it would rest on the remains of some dead hero. There Death could be seen in every shape and form imaginable; the hoary-headed veteran, and the gentle youth who had not yet seen twenty summers, lay side by side . . .³

¹ *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. XI, part 1, 455.

² Twichell Papers (MSS at Yale Univ. Library) Letter May 9, 1862.

³ James Stevenson, *History of the Excelsior Brigade* (Paterson, N. J., 1863), 23.

Lieut. David B. Parker of the Third Excelsiors, although exhausted, was so moved that he could not sleep:

As we buried our dead comrades that night, we realized for the first time the horrors of war. At a late hour Orderly Sergeant Post . . . and I . . . spread some blankets under a little sapling and lay down to get some rest, but we could not sleep, and later a whipporwill lit in the small tree above our heads and commenced his doleful song. We got up and drove him away several times, but he returned and kept it up till daylight.⁴

Ten days later Felix Brannigan of the Fifth Excelsiors was to look back on the battle with less shock but much pride in what the Brigade had accomplished:

The Excelsior Brigade has done its duty and kept the whole force of the enemy at bay from morning until late in the afternoon. I see the papers do not do us justice yet but they have not had time for statistics To my knowledge we lost 774 men, about one fourth of our number in action. In killed and wounded we suffered twice as severely as the enemy—in fact we were whipped but didn't know it. So we fought on till we whipped them. General Hooker who commanded our Division complimented us very highly. And Heintzleman pointed to us as we were going in, saying "There goes Soldiers."⁵

Brannigan touched on a point that was to rankle in the Excelsior Brigade for months. Faith in General McClellan was high but the men in the ranks were indignant that they were not given the credit that they had earned. The officers felt the same way. Shortly after the battle, in talking with Colonel Mott of the Fifth New Jersey, Hooker said, ". . . Mott, it seems to me you and I, and your Jersey Blues and the Excelsior Brigade were not at Williamsburg at all!"⁶ McClellan hastened to rectify this impression for on May 11th he wrote to Secretary Stanton:

Without waiting further for official reports which have not yet reached me, I wish to bear testimony to the splendid conduct of Hooker's and Kearney's divisions . . . in the battle of Williamsburg. Their bearing was worthy of veterans. Hooker's division for hours gallantly withstood the attack of greatly superior numbers⁷

This was better late than never, but the spirit of the Brigade had already been forged in battle and nothing that happened during the remainder of the war was able to destroy this.

The Excelsior Brigade remained in Williamsburg until the 9th and 10th of May encamped about a mile from the town. Fresher troops pursued the retreating rebels. The dead had been buried with

4 David B. Parker, *A Chautauqua Boy in '61* (Boston, 1912), 15.

5 Letters of Felix Brannigan, Manuscript Collection, Library of Congress. Camp near West Point, Va., May 15, 1862.

6 Walter Hebert, *Fighting Joe Hooker* (New York, 1944), 89.

7 *Chicago Tribune*, May 20, 1862.

some attention to regimental units, the wounded placed in the William and Mary College buildings and in the churches of the town to await transport to the hospitals of the north on the steamers *Daniel Webster* and *Commodore*. Good spirits prevailed. H. J. Raymond of the *New York Times* heard an Excelsior say to one of the rebel prisoners in Williamsburg, "You didn't give us a fair chance—as fast as one of us tried to climb over the trees you had cut down, you popped us over . . ." ⁸

There was another western Pennsylvania unit with the Excelsior Brigade. It had been organized in July 1861 at Tidioute in Warren County and formed parts of Companies F and H of the Fifth Excelsior Regiment. At Williamsburg it suffered heavy losses, as did the other Pennsylvania units. Isaac C. Bailey and Joshua Richardson were killed. Leonard Littlefield and Solomon Sias died of wounds received in the battle, and Martin Bingham, Frank Brown and Finley Cameron were discharged for disability caused by wounds.

The Excelsior Regiments had been under the leadership of Colonel Nelson Taylor ever since landing on the Peninsula. Daniel Sickles had been battling with the U. S. Senate for confirmation of his nomination to Brigadier General and it was not until May 13th that the General, by a 19 to 18 vote, won his Brigadier's star. After Williamsburg Colonel Taylor returned to his regiment, the Third Excelsior, and General J. J. Abercrombie succeeded to command for a short time. News soon filtered through that Sickles was again in command of the Brigade. On May 16th Chaplain Twichell wrote: "Immense enthusiasm was aroused yesterday by the news of Gen. Sickles' confirmation. We will give him a rousing welcome when he comes." ⁹ Twichell had had reservations about Sickles during the Staten Island days but was now wholeheartedly on his side. The Excelsiors were encamped near West Point when the good news arrived.

James Stevenson claimed that Sickles had rejoined his men at a place called Bailey's Cross Roads—perhaps he meant Baltimore Cross Roads. Other accounts claim that the reunion took place near Bottom's Bridge on the Chickahominy, but all accounts agree that there was a warm reception. "Cheer after cheer rent the air as the General passed from regiment to regiment, and officers and men all

⁸ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, May 19, 1862.

⁹ Twichell, *op.cit.*, May 16, 1862.

ran together to take him by the hand.”¹⁰ With characteristic pride and some bombast Sickles issued an order praising his brigade:

. . . at Williamsburg you won imperishable renown. As long as this war has a place in history, the courage, constancy and steadiness which you displayed in that unequal combat will make the 5th of May memorable in our annals. The enemy has felt your power, and the nation appreciates your worth.¹¹

The brief rest at Williamsburg had done the Excelsior regiments much good, but as they proceeded northward the weather became increasingly bad with steady and often heavy rains. There was much sickness in the army and McClellan was prompted, on the advice of the Medical Director of the Army, to order an extra ration of one gill of whiskey served daily to everyone.¹² From the beginning of the Peninsular Campaign hospital ships had been busy ferrying sick and wounded to hospitals as far away as Albany, New York. Except for the casualties at Williamsburg the Friend Rifles and Zouave Cadets had been fairly healthy, but there was illness. Henry W. Billings, discharged for disability September 19, 1862, and John Lawton of the Cadets were sent to hospitals in New York City. William Sherwood, also of the Cadets, was sent to Alexandria, Virginia, where he died, January 28, 1863. From the Friend Rifles, Patrick C. Daly went to Washington, Jack Lowstetter and Michael C. Daly went to New York City. William Lowry went to Patterson Park Hospital in Baltimore where he died on June 3rd. Henry Forbes of the Friend Rifles arrived in New York sick on July 7th, and strangely enough is listed as having deserted at Fair Oaks, Virginia, on June 29th. Of the Tidioute boys in Co. H of the Fifth Excelsior, C. Markdale was sent to Philadelphia where he died on September 12th. Patrick Sweeney was sent to Philadelphia and George Roper to New York. The common ailments were listed as diarrhea, hernia, rheumatism, general debility and dysentery, and the passenger lists of the hospital ships contained the names of Excelsior soldiers by the tens and twenties. Brannigan marvelled at his own health. Toward the end of the campaign he wrote, “I must have an iron constitution for I have held up where thousands of men far stronger physically have given up to disease.”¹³

The Excelsior Brigade had moved by stages from Williamsburg,

¹⁰ Stevenson, *op.cit.*, 24.

¹¹ *New York Times*, June 2, 1862.

¹² Hebert, *op.cit.*, 95. Order from McClellan to Hooker, May 19, 1862.

¹³ Brannigan, *op.cit.*, July 16, 1862.

north of the Chickahominy to near West Point, to New Kent Court House, to Baltimore Cross Roads and on to Bottom's Bridge. On May 25th, while the First and Third Brigades of Hooker's Division moved across the river in the direction of White Oak Bridge, the Excelsior Brigade remained encamped at Bottom's. A terrible storm came up on the afternoon of May 30th, the river rose, connecting bridges were nearly carried away and the Army of the Potomac was in serious danger of being split in two. At the same time Brannigan was writing confidently:

Before you read this you will most probably have read in the papers that we have commenced an active campaign against the enemy. The Grand Army of the Potomac "never yet checked" has driven the rebels from every stronghold on the Peninsula and is now encamped within half a day's march of their capitol. Before it on the plains are 120,000 Confederate troops to give us battle — a day — an hour may bring on the conflict. Their cause is fast becoming desperate, the bitter hatred increasing in proportion Defeat is not in our Dictionary. Flushed with recent victory — equal in numbers, superior in training and equipment our troops will scatter them like chaff before the whirlwind.¹⁴

The fact was that the Confederates had retreated as far as they intended to, and on May 31st at one o'clock they launched an attack on the Union forces, Casey's Division in particular, which had reached a point about six miles from Richmond on the Williamsburg Stage Road, a mile or so west of Seven Pines. Seven Pines was at the junction of Nine Mile Road and the Williamsburg Stage Road, a mile south of Fair Oaks Station on the Richmond and York River Railroad. General Casey's Division, in the fore, bore the brunt of the attack. Composed of a mixture of raw troops and veterans, the division gave way. History has had much to say of this setback which nearly became a rout. The Excelsior regiments wasted no sympathy on Casey or his men. They were at Bottom's Bridge when word of the emergency came. Leaving all but their fighting equipment behind, they "double quicked" in the direction of Fair Oaks, some seven or eight miles away. As they advanced they met demoralized troops from the front which led Stevenson to comment, "Dark and gloomy were the hopes of the brave Excelsior Nothing could be heard from the retreating troops of CASEY but expressions of utter hopelessness, coupled with the greatness of the enemy's number."¹⁵ The evening had so far advanced that, for the Excelsiors, the battle did not begin until the next morning, June 1st.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, May 30, 1862.

¹⁵ Stevenson, *op.cit.*, 25.

Here, as at Williamsburg, the enemy took advantage of the woods on both sides of the Williamsburg Road. Wrote one eyewitness:

I never saw a handsomer sight than Sickles's brigade advancing up that road, Sunday morning, the second day of the battle. The enemy fired upon them from these woods, but never a man flinched. They came up in column, magnificently, to that house yonder; then formed in line of battle across the fields, and went in with flags flying and bayonets shining, and drove the Rebels.¹⁶

This refers to the Second Excelsiors who had not been at Williamsburg but now, in their first action, covered themselves with glory. Less spectacularly the First Regiment (Friend Rifles) and the Fifth Regiment (Zouave Cadets) proceeded through the oak undergrowth, crossed some swampy ground, found the enemy, the 8th and 9th Alabama, in the open and drove them to the timber beyond. This was in the direction of the railroad.¹⁷

Brannigan wrote, with pardonable pride:

We were brought up afterwards [after the Casey retreat] and the way we made the rebels retire showed that they had not forgotten Williamsburg. Our killed and wounded is slight—I verily believe that it was only our name that caused this — for the moment the Rebels knew that Hooker's and Sickles' men were attacking them they put for the bare life. We drove them far into the swamp and on the Railroad to within 4 miles of Richmond.¹⁸

On the afternoon of June 2nd the Excelsiors reoccupied Casey's old position and a reconnaissance group reached a point three miles from Richmond. That night the men retired behind Casey's old lines because the stench of the dead in the summer heat was so strong it caused vomiting. Lieut. David Parker of the Third Excelsiors gave a detailed picture of the Fair Oaks aftermath:

The ground was very wet and in some places covered with water. Both horses and men lay about in every direction, and the heat was intense. The horses would quickly swell up so that they would all be lying on their backs with their legs extended in the air, and the poor dead soldiers, on both sides, were in the same condition, swollen so full that their clothes would burst. As soon as possible men were detailed to bury the dead, but in most cases this was done by simply shoveling earth upon them as they lay, and the earth was in clods so that the covering was not complete. The stench was intolerable. No good water could be obtained. A little well was dug and a barrel sunk in the ground, which speedily filled with surface water, and this after being boiled was the water the soldiers drank. Strict orders were issued that all the water should be boiled. Sickness immediately affected nearly every man. Barrels of whiskey were issued. The open barrel was given a large amount of quinine, and soldiers stood by with a stick to stir it when men were marched up with their cups, given a ration, and told to drink it then and there.¹⁹

16 J. T. Trowbridge, *Picture of the Desolated States* (Hartford, 1868), 203.

17 *Official Records*, Series I, Vol. XI, part 1, 822-3.

18 Brannigan, *op.cit.*, June 5, 1862.

19 Parker, *op.cit.*, 19-20.

On the 3rd the Excelsiors were relieved by General Grover's men, and the next day precautions were relaxed so that the dead of three days before could be buried. Sickles was so irked at having his men constantly in the front lines that he sent word to his superiors that if they wanted him to take Richmond alone he would go to New York and raise another brigade.²⁰ Brannigan reported, "Rain—I believe it always rains here—we are drenched, soaked, drowned, and no blankets, no tents—and *standing under arms 80 (eighty) hours*. Our brigade alone was found willing to hold in check the enemy on the left for that time. In fact we hold it still tho reinforced by the Massachusetts Infantry."²¹

In the fight at Fair Oaks the First Excelsiors lost two men killed, 15 wounded and one missing while the Fifth Excelsiors had one man killed, and 19 wounded. The Friend Rifles had no casualties. Two Zouave Cadets, however, Nicholas Burton and Thomas J. Patterson, were slightly wounded, as was Michael Dogan, Co. F., Fifth Excelsior, from Tidioute.

After Fair Oaks there was a lull, but the picket lines were much too close for comfort. The Excelsiors were still on both sides of the Williamsburg Road near Seven Pines, and there was continual skirmishing with the enemy. Even though the three Hooker brigades were rotated, one in the trenches, one on picket and one in camp, the strain was nearly unbearable. One soldier remarked, "We could not get a breath of fresh air, a drink of good water, or a sound night's rest." Whiskey was served morning and night to keep malaria down and morale up.²²

The arrival of shelter tents helped but Stevenson felt that the rebels went out of their way to be unfair to the Excelsiors. On picket duty every third day and night they were exposed to constant fire by enemy sharpshooters. When the First or Third Brigades were on picket there was little or no firing. As soon as the Excelsiors moved in there was immediate firing "which often terminated in a brush between the pickets on both sides." When firing occurred on any part of the line held by Hooker the expression would be heard, "that is the d—d SICKLES' men again." There was a real skirmish on June 14th when the rebels advanced under the

20 Stevenson, *op.cit.*, 27.

21 Brannigan, *op.cit.*, June 5, 1862.

22 Warren H. Cudworth, *History of the First Regiment Massachusetts Infantry* (Boston, 1866), 197.

protection of rain and thunder and hit the Fourth Excelsior Regiment, "killing and wounding quite a number, and taking forty men and a captain prisoners." ²³

Brannigan referred to the constant alarms, with the regiments drawn in line of battle half a dozen times a night, and he was bitter with the enemy. ". . . our pickets receive orders not to fire at those of the rebels, yet they after agreeing to the rule are constantly murdering our men in cold blood If we are brought into the fight now our men swear that if McClellan, Hooker and Sickles were beside them that they will take no prisoners and bayonet every damned wounded rebel on the field." He was also aware of the importance of the position held by Hooker's Division protecting the left flank of the army. ". . . we are in constant expectation of attack and if repulsed—a thing next to impossible—the day will be the Rebels—but before doing it they will have to exterminate Kearney's and Hooker's divisions and the Irish Brigade" As he wrote Brannigan could hear the rumble of gunfire from the James River where the gunboats were attacking Fort Darling, and like every foot soldier from the beginning of time he envied the bluejackets. ". . . I like the dashing way in which the sailors slam right into the enemy—none of your dull, weary, plodding, earth-digging, trench-making . . . of land operations." ²⁴

There was to be some surcease from "earth-digging." At eight in the morning on June 25th, after two days of intermittent rain and the rain still falling, the advance began. The Excelsior regiments moving forward toward Richmond on both sides of the Williamsburg Road, began what was to be known as the Battle of the Orchards, or King's School House, or Oak Grove. They met heavy resistance and suffered some casualties, but drove steadily forward until they "took up a position on a piece of elevated ground, from which the steeples of Richmond could be plainly seen." ²⁵

The Fifth Excelsior was on the left of the road supported on its left by the First Excelsior. They met heavy fire from enemy rifle-pits which were overrun, and continued to advance steadily until shortly after eleven o'clock, when the order came to halt the advance. The entire brigade remained in battle formation at the edge of a

23 Stevenson, *op.cit.*, 28.

24 Brannigan, *op.cit.*, June 17, 1862.

25 Stevenson, *op.cit.*, 30.

wood.²⁶ The order to retire has always remained something of a mystery. It came by way of a telegram from General Marcy of McClellan's staff addressed to General Heintzelman, which reached Hooker shortly before eleven o'clock. Hooker was mystified but had no recourse but to obey. When the word reached Sickles he sent an aide to remonstrate but he too could only obey. General McClellan arrived on the field at one o'clock to find action suspended as ordered, but impressed by the advance of the Third Corps he ordered a continuation of the attack. The advance was resumed and the First Excelsiors drove through a wood and a swamp to an open field, which position was held until 6:30 p.m., with the Fifth Excelsiors on their right.²⁷ The position reached by the Excelsior Brigade at a point called Oak Grove was the nearest approach to Richmond made by the Union Army during the campaign. Neither Hooker nor Sickles was ever convinced that the attack should have been stopped. On the contrary, they believed that they could have advanced the remaining four miles and captured the city. This is one of the many moot points of the war. During the action the First Excelsiors lost six killed, 11 wounded and one missing; the Fifth Excelsiors lost two killed and 28 wounded.

Although the Excelsiors were not as yet aware of it the retreat from Richmond had begun. They returned to their trenches just west of Seven Pines and continued to man them in rotation with the other two brigades of their division. They were in the trenches on June 26th, in camp on the 27th, back in the trenches on the 28th. The retreat began in earnest in the thick fog of early morning on the 29th. Pickets were called in, the artillery withdrawn, and the destruction of supplies begun. Savage Station, Glendale or White Oak Swamp, and Malvern Hill became fierce rear guard actions. Stevenson, without going into detail, gives a graphic description of the retreat from Seven Pines to Harrison's Landing known as the "Seven Days":

. . . There was no time now to be lost; no time for asking questions as to where they were going or what they were going to do; all that was left for them to do was to pack up and prepare to march. That night [June 28th] boxes of new muskets were broken to pieces, cases of new clothing destroyed, commissariat stores set fire to, and everything that would be of any use whatever to the enemy was rendered completely useless. Sunday morning at four o'clock, on the 29th of June, we again find the Excelsior Brigade marching away from a position which by their toil and labor had defied the whole rebel army to wrest from them . . . therefore it was

²⁶ *Official Records*, Series I, Vol. XI, part 2, 143.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

with the greatest reluctance that the EXCELSIOR Brigade began its retrograde movement from Richmond.

Before reaching Savage Station, which was distant only two miles from camp, the enemy came rushing with a murderous yell, and once more the EXCELSIOR Brigade had to meet their foes. Again the rebels were beaten and driven back

Once more we find the brigade engaged in deadly combat with the enemy at Malvern Hill In this engagement the Excelsior Brigade played a prominent part, which may be known from the fact that during the short time the brigade was engaged it lost three hundred and fifty men A severe storm succeeded the fight, which placed the roads in a most shocking condition, but yet fatigued and drenched to the skin the men dragged on . . . no sooner were the men halted than they wrapped themselves up in their blankets and lying on the ground, already saturated with rain, went to sleep.²⁸

Brannigan gave one man's version of the retreat, with a wry touch of humor, when he wrote his sister, "We have been retreating and fighting some very terrible battles since Sunday last. Forward to Richmond is again the word but I don't know the route which we have to take . . . the last 7 days ending 2nd July . . . we have not had twelve hours sleep."²⁹

Despite official assurances Chaplain Twichell was undeceived as to the seriousness of the setback as he grieved over the sacrifice of 30,000 dead. "I could not help a feeling of rebellion against the fate that forces the abandonment of ground that cost so much blood and was so sacred . . . When I think of how grand our army was last winter, and of how much it has since cost in men and money, and how little it has been made to accomplish and of its present condition I am persuaded that something or somebody is all wrong."³⁰

From July 2nd on, the Union position at Harrison's Landing on the James River was impregnable, but the Peninsular Campaign had been a failure. The army dug in and the Excelsior regiments moved to a permanent camp on a slight elevation west of Rowland's Mill Pond.³¹ Casualties had been heavy and General Hooker was worried over the skeleton appearance of Sickles' Brigade. He thought that the five regiments should be combined and reduced to two, but Sickles was confident that he could refill his depleted ranks with new recruits. On July 16th Sickles was ordered to proceed to New York with the admonition, "The General commanding relies upon General Sickles to use his utmost exertion to hasten the filling up

28 Stevenson, *op.cit.*, 31.

29 Brannigan, *op.cit.*, Camp near James River, July 5, 1862.

30 Twichell, *op.cit.*, July 5 and August 21, 1862.

31 Hebert, *op.cit.*, 112.

of his regiments and to rejoin his command at the earliest possible moment.”³² Chaplain Twichell was worried that Sickles' insistence on maintaining the Excelsior regiments as units independent of any State authority would make it impossible to fill the depleted ranks with New York State levies, yet he had confidence in Sickles' recruiting ability. “. . . we cannot remain as we are. Five separate regimental organizations cannot be continued with only 2,000 effective men (we had 4500). Consolidation is not to be thought of for it would unjustly cast out brave and deserving officers. After all, the only apparent method of recovering our strength, is to let us go to some convenient place, and fill up our own book . . . ”³³

The recruiting effort was to take months, not weeks, and was never to be completely successful. Chaplain Twichell was on the platform with Sickles early in August at a Fireman's Military meeting in New York, when only five recruits came forward despite Sickles' eloquence. When, in exhorting the audience a second time, “he alluded to European intervention, a young man in the crowd exclaimed, ‘Let it come.’ ‘My friend,’ said [Sickles], ‘I want you to help me fight the little battle we now have on hand first.’ The young man came forward and said something about fighting for ‘niggers’, and then backed out with a very lame apology . . . He was hissed down.”³⁴

The recruiting effort continued well into the autumn. At a mass meeting in New York late in September Hiram C. Barney, Collector of the Port of New York, gave an eloquent speech about the heroic service rendered by the Excelsior Brigade, but his gloomy statistics were not designed to encourage the faint of heart. “The total loss of this Brigade, during the period of active service, in killed, wounded, missing and disabled, is upward of 3,000 men. The veterans who survive are now stationed for the defense of Washington, waiting until their thinned ranks are filled with new recruits, before it again takes the field for aggressive action.”³⁵ Nevertheless, men did come forward; 275 recruits left New York in the last week of September. “The private bounties now given in addition to those of the city and State to this brigade will undoubtedly fill it up before the time assigned to draft.”³⁶ Despite the State, city and private bounties,

32 *Official Records*, Series I, Vol. XI, part 3, 325.

33 Twichell, *op.cit.*, July 19, 1862.

34 *New York Tribune*, August 5, 1862.

35 *Ibid.*, Sept. 30, 1862.

36 *Ibid.*, October 1, 1862.

however, the Excelsior Brigade numbered only 2,300 effectives on October 20th, but the slightly wounded, the convalescent, and paroled prisoners were returning in larger numbers.³⁷

The Pittsburgh companies were affected by all of this activity. Returning to the Friend Rifles were John F. Schroeder, Harry Scandrett, John Dalgleish, Andrew Samuel Keifer, William Brookmeyer, Charles Franke, William G. Ritchie, John K. Irwin, Henry Aiken and James Whitley, all of whom had been captured at Williamsburg and had been waiting since late July in Annapolis, Maryland, to be exchanged.³⁸ Also joining the First Regiment, some assigned to the Friend Rifles, were 25 new recruits from Susquehanna, in Susquehanna County in northeastern Pennsylvania, men who had signed up in August and September 1862. The paroled prisoners who rejoined the Zouave Cadets were George Bond and Francis Remeley who had also been captured at Williamsburg. The Cadets received no replacements.

The returned men did not make up for the losses suffered during the Peninsular Campaign. It is impossible to state with any accuracy what happened to some of the men who were discharged as disabled, whether the disability was caused by wounds or illness and at what time the disability occurred. From the Zouave Cadets, George Byington, who was wounded at Malvern Hill, was discharged November 10, 1862; William Collins and John Ward were discharged July 18th and July 15th, from Harrison's Landing, and David Little on January 22, 1863, from Fortress Monroe. John McHenry died of wounds September 5th at Alexandria, Virginia.

From the Friend Rifles, John Blakely was discharged from Harrison's Landing, July 17th; Richard C. Hannen died of disease at David's Island, New York Harbor, June 4th; James Raferty was discharged May 31st and William Slaughterbeck, July 18th at Alexandria, Virginia; Theodore Smith, February 18, 1863, and John Young, December 26, 1862, at Fortress Monroe, Virginia. Captain John Oakley, son of John M. Oakley, who had been captured in one of the engagements, escaped from Richmond "and entered the picket lines last night (August 5th) near West Point"³⁹; he was discharged October 31st.

From the Tidioute Company William Fleming died May 20,

³⁷ *Ibid.*, October 20, 1862.

³⁸ *Pittsburg Gazette*, July 25, 1862.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, August 12, 1862.

1862, in Baltimore; Charles Hechel died of disease, June 22nd at David's Island, New York Harbor; Nathan Loveless died of disease August 10th at Harrison's Landing; Charles Markale, sent to Philadelphia from Harrison's Landing, died of disease there September 12th; Anzi E. Moyn was discharged at Baltimore, July 4th; George Roper, sent north ill in June, was discharged at Albany, New York, October 27th; Patrick Sweeney, ill since August 13th, was discharged in New York October 29th. John Tewey, who had been wounded at Malvern Hill, was discharged October 11th, and Morris B. Wells was discharged from Harrison's Landing July 28th.

Although pushed back to Harrison's Landing, the Army of the Potomac was not a defeated army. There was still strength for offensive action and, characteristically, it was General Hooker who proposed and executed the advance. He believed that Malvern Hill could be retaken. On the first attempt on August 2nd the movement was halted because faulty guiding made surprise impossible but on the 4th a second try was made, this one successful. On August 6th three Confederate divisions drove in the Union pickets and a pitched battle was imminent, but that night Hooker's brigades were inexplicably recalled.⁴⁰ So it was that the Excelsior regiments saw action in the first and last battles of the Peninsular Campaign, and had also been among those troops to reach the point of farthest penetration toward Richmond.

Some interesting sidelights of the campaign reveal individual reactions toward the enemy and toward slavery. Chaplain Bulkley of the First Excelsiors, quartered in the "spacious and elegant mansion" of Dr. John G. Carter near Bottom's Bridge, in company with Chaplain Twichell of the Second Regiment, came across an interesting volume in Dr. Carter's library. It was entitled *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America*, and in it the two ministers found this note: "It is said that Mr. Robert Carter, of Noming, Virginia, has emancipated 442 slaves. This is a sacrifice on the altar of humanity of perhaps a hundred thousand dollars . . .," to which Chaplain Twichell could not resist appending his own thoughts on the matter. "Exempla et verba Patri nobilis, filleis ingratis nulli pensa sunt—Amicus et immicus tuus—Abolitionas. (The examples and precepts of a noble father are deemed of no value by ungrateful sons—your friend and foe—Abolitionist.)"⁴¹

⁴⁰ Hebert, *op.cit.*, 117.

⁴¹ *New York Tribune*, June 4, 1862. The translation is Chaplain Bulkley's.

Twichell was witness to another episode which pointed up the illogic of the thinking of the high command. A cow wandered into camp and was appropriated because soldiers, ill with fever, needed milk. But the standing order was to respect Confederate property and when the cow's owner came for his property the beast had to be returned. Nor would he sell any milk, so the Union sick went without.⁴² Brannigan was even angrier with the "protection of enemy property" order and his anger overflowed to include the contrabands as well:

They must pass laws to protect even the spring wells of absent enemy officers from the foul contamination of northern soldiers drinking out of them—on picket we have to drink swamp water while there are two . . . wells and a rebel officer's house and farm guarded by our Bayonets close to us Let the niggers be sent here to use the pick and shovel in the broiling sun as we are now doing and we will take a soldier's tool—the gun—and Bayonet⁴³

Excelsior soldiers liked to think that the enemy troops signalled them out for special attention. There is some evidence that at times this may have been true, but most of the time the feeling grew out of a fierce pride and loyalty to the brigade. They would not have been flattered to know that a Richmond paper carried the item, "A portion of the force of the enemy engaged was the notorious drunken brigade of Sickles."⁴⁴ General Sickles remembered an incident from the Battle of Glendale which sheds some light on the Confederate reaction to the Excelsior Brigade. Among the rebel prisoners taken there was an officer of a Georgia regiment:

Saluting me as he offered his sword, he asked to be informed in whose hands he had fallen. Learning that he was my captive, he said with a smile of satisfaction:

"General, you must take a heap more prisoners before you get even."

I told him I had not suffered much in that way, and believed that the hundred and fifty taken that day put me ahead.

With a confident air he replied: "Well, if we haven't killed and captured a brigade of your men, my reckoning is upside down."

The exultation of the Georgian major arose from the fact that all the New York troops equipped by the State, when organized, wore buttons with the word "Excelsior" on their uniforms, — this being the motto on the State escutcheon, and the belief therefore prevailed among the enemy, that whenever they captured prisoners with "Excelsior" on their coat buttons, they were making sad havoc in the ranks of "Sickles' Excelsior Brigade!"⁴⁵

The Union position at Harrison's Landing was well fortified.

⁴² Twichell, *op.cit.*, June 25, 1862.

⁴³ Brannigan, *op.cit.*, July 16, 1862.

⁴⁴ *Richmond Enquirer*, June 26, 1862.

⁴⁵ *Journal of the Military Service Institute of the United States*, Vol. 6, No. 22, 156.

The soldiers were in no danger, had little to do and could spend their time in griping—and thinking. The pickets picked blackberries and huckleberries, “like a set of school boys—not veterans,” wrote Brannigan, yet he had time to worry about David de Zouche, in Pittsburgh, whose Williamsburg wound was not healing properly, and went out of his way to warn him not to return to the Peninsula until thoroughly restored because “Nothing but the stamp of Death in a man’s face can get him leave of absence now.”⁴⁶ He tried to quash rumors about dissension in the Zouave Cadets which apparently had been spreading through Pittsburgh. He insisted that the men were devoted and loyal to General Sickles and that the General returned their affection. He blamed Captain Glass for whatever trouble there was, claiming that Glass “split up [the company] to serve his own ends, and now that his own hopes of promotion are blasted through his treachery to his best friend Colonel Graham—he will move heaven and earth to have himself and the company transferred to Pennsylvania [*i.e.*, a Pennsylvania regiment]. I can see thro his movements but some of the company will do his bidding and sign any petitions he may desire of them.”⁴⁷ Whether there was much fire behind this smoke is hard to say. Captain Glass was discharged for disability, December 19, 1862, and entered the Pennsylvania State legislature in 1864. Lieut. James H. Stewart was discharged June 13, 1862, to serve with the 91st N.Y. Volunteer Infantry, an Albany, New York, regiment. George Whitesides was discharged March 25, 1863, for transfer to a Pennsylvania regiment. There is no evidence that either Stewart or Whitesides left Co. A because of dissatisfaction; they are the only ones who did leave.

On June 27, 1862, General John Pope assumed command of the newly formed Army of Virginia, and he considered it his chief responsibility, after it was obvious that the Peninsular Campaign was a failure, to protect the approaches to Washington and to give the Army of the Potomac time to retire from the Peninsula. The Excelsior Brigade began its withdrawal from Harrison’s Landing on August 14th, marched east to Charles City Court House with no resistance from the enemy. On the 16th the brigade turned north and camped just short of Jones’ Bridge on the Chickahominy. A long day’s march on the 17th brought them to the scene of their first baptism of fire at Williamsburg, but this time nothing more serious than colic

⁴⁶ Brannigan, *op.cit.*, July 26, 1862.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, July 16, 1862.

brought on by eating green apples bothered the Zouave Cadets.⁴⁸ Yorktown was reached on the 19th and by the 21st the Excelsior regiments were on the *Vanderbilt*, their destination Aquia Creek.

The original intention was to disembark at Aquia Creek and to march to the aid of Pope's army which was headed for trouble on the Rappahannock, but the transport fleet moved on to Alexandria. On the afternoon of August 24th the Excelsiors were in camp two miles west of that city at Shuter's Hill along the tracks of the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. These men were now war hardened veterans and at least two of the regiments had a reputation for heavy drinking. Stevenson's account of the way they took Alexandria has its amusing aspects. As soon as they could escape the camp the men rushed into the city to make merry. For nearly five months they had been shock troops in an arduous campaign and they were ripe for mischief:

In a short time the juice of the rye gained the ascendancy and then commenced the sport. Fighting in the streets became general and the whole town was soon one continual uproar. The Provost Guard interfered, and came down the street at "charge bayonets", but a number of the Excelsior being also armed, met them in like manner and chased them for their very lives from street to street until not a single one of the Guard could be seen.

The following morning General HOOKER was called upon and told that his men were creating a great disturbance in town, fighting and rioting in a fearful manner. [General Sickles was not with the Brigade—he was still on recruiting duty.]

"Indeed", remarked the General, very coolly, "have there been many lives lost?"

"No", was the reply.

"Any arms or legs broken?" continued the General.

The answer was in the negative.

"Well, then", said the General, "there is no harm done yet; the men are only having a little recreation; let them alone and they will do no injury; but being out in the woods for the last twelve months has doubtless made them a little wild, but they will soon get over it."⁴⁹

Hooker may have and very probably did say this, but on the 23rd and 24th of August General Herman Haupt was sending urgent telegrams trying to locate him in Washington.⁵⁰ Haupt was trying to make arrangements to send the troops forward by rail, as ordered, though it might have been just as easy for them to have walked. From early morning until late at night on the 25th, men from Hooker's division were being dispatched by rail, but Haupt was getting more and more irritated. "Some of Gen. Hooker's command . . . are still here. He had 5,600 men to forward [all that was left

48 As told to the author when a small boy, by his grandfather, Henry Bruce Sutherland.

49 Stevenson, *op.cit.*, 34.

50 *Reminiscences of General Herman Haupt*, 1901, 85 and 89.

of three full brigades] and we sent cars for 6,000. They could not have been properly loaded." ⁵¹

Brannigan of the Zouave Cadets missed the train and consequently the engagements which made up the second Battle of Bull Run.⁵² But the rest of the Pittsburgh men rolled on and found themselves at two o'clock in the morning of August 26th, after a cold night ride, encamped in a field two or three miles south of Warrenton Junction. They expected a breathing spell after their long journey, but that night "orders were received that we should make ready to march at 6 o'clock with three days rations." ⁵³ The Excelsior regiments were headed for trouble.

The Union commanders were unaware that Stonewall Jackson had, on August 25th, started a long sweep around the Union right with about 25,000 men. His intention was to cause all of the trouble that he could. Jackson's army crossed the Rappahannock at Henson's Mills, four miles northwest of the nearest Union forces stationed at Waterloo Bridge. The first day Jackson's men marched twenty-five miles north to Salem. The next day, the 26th, the Confederate forces turned east, crossed the Bull Run Mountains through Thoroughfare Gap and were joined by General Stuart's cavalry at Gainsville. By sunset they were at Bristoe Station, after having covered twenty-three miles since dawn, and were squarely across General Pope's line of communication to Washington, and thirteen miles to the rear of his headquarters at Warrenton Junction.

It was obvious that something had gone wrong. At two o'clock in the morning of August 27th the Third Excelsior Regiment was ordered to move from Warrenton Junction toward Manassas Junction to find out what had happened. The regiment moved by train to Catlett's Station, proceeded on foot to within about half a mile of Bristoe with skirmishers out, where, by the light of burning trains and supplies, they found the enemy in force.⁵⁴ Jackson had moved north to Manassas Junction but a strong rear guard under General Ewell, consisting of Early's and Lawton's and the Louisiana Brigade, was in a good position at Bristoe. Wisely, Capt. Harman Bliss of the Third Excelsiors, whose first command it was, retired to the bridge at Kettle Run, decided that it could not be defended, and by

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁵² Brannigan, *op.cit.*, September 20, 1862.

⁵³ Twichell, *op.cit.*, August 28, 1862.

⁵⁴ *Official Records*, Series I, Vol. XII, 450.

five in the morning had rejoined the Brigade at Warrenton Junction.

They had little rest, however, for Hooker's whole division was soon ordered toward Bristoe. The division proceeded along the tracks of the Orange and Alexandria Railroad and the dirt roads that paralleled the tracks on either side as far as Kettle Run, just south of Bristoe, where they encountered the enemy. Here, as at Williamsburg, the Excelsior regiments were to fight a sharp and bloody engagement that was to prove little except their courage and endurance, for General Ewell had been ordered not to get involved in a full scale battle and by dusk he had retired, or been driven, beyond Broad Run, leaving his dead and wounded on the field. He then marched to join Jackson at Manassas Junction.

The fight at Bristoe Station or Kettle Run started about two o'clock in the afternoon of August 27th, was a sharply contested one for two hours, and continued spasmodically until dusk. The brunt of the battle was borne by the New Jersey regiments under Colonel Carr and the Excelsior regiments under Colonel Taylor. The Fifth Excelsiors (Zouave Cadets) were to the left of the New Jersey Brigade and all were on the west side of the railroad tracks. They encountered heavy going in wooded areas which extended on both sides of the railroad and, when they reached the open, they were exposed to heavy fire from the enemy protected by the railroad embankment. As a result, casualties were heavy. The First Excelsior Regiment (Friend Rifles), ordered to protect the flanks of the other Excelsior regiments, was not heavily engaged though the men did press forward "planting [their] colors on the track and securing the rebel dead and wounded."⁵⁵ The First Regiment lost 27 men in wounded and missing; the Fifth had 16 dead or mortally wounded, 62 wounded and 12 missing.

The Friend Rifles were fortunate. They had no casualties at Bristoe. The Zouave Cadets had a number wounded, some severely. Florence Berton, Corp. John W. Hemphill and William Murray were not severely injured, but Corp. James Estip was discharged for wounds November 3, 1862, at Washington; William O'Neal was discharged for wounds June 8, 1863, at Alexandria, as were John C. Porter, October 11, 1862, and John A. Robertson, December 20th. Lieutenant Robert D. Andrews and John Kiffer from the Tidioute company of the Fifth Regiment were both killed.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 446-7.

Hooker's men were down to five rounds of ammunition each after the Bristoe engagement with no supplies nearer than Warrenton Junction. The Excelsior Brigade buried its dead, sent the wounded to the rear and re-formed on the east side of the railroad to wait. By dusk they had re-crossed the railroad, forded Broad Run and bivouacked in line of battle for the night. Meanwhile, after burning the supplies at Manassas Junction that he could not take with him, General Jackson had withdrawn to the vicinity of Groveton and Sudley Springs half a dozen miles to the northwest. Here he cleverly concealed his brigades and waited.

The Excelsiors arrived at Manassas late in the morning and by midafternoon were north of the Junction on the road to Centerville. The whole division rested for part of the night of August 28th near the old battlefield of Bull Run. It had rained in the afternoon and the scene was a sad one. ". . . the mounds of the departed,—mostly without headboards,—pieces of shells, old caps, shreds of clothing, and scraps of leather lying about, awakened a melancholy interest among most of the men . . ." ⁵⁶

Long before daylight on August 29th Hooker's men were marching rapidly in the direction of Centerville at which point they were issued a day's rations, then they turned southwest in the direction of Groveton where a battle had started the night before. By two o'clock Hooker's three brigades were in line of battle on the Union right facing the Confederate General A. P. Hill's Light Division with woods and an unfinished railroad between the forces. The New Jersey Brigade and the Excelsiors attacked, were stopped and attacked again. It was General Grover's First Brigade, however, that made the deepest penetration when they drove through a cut in the railroad embankment only to be driven back by a fierce counterattack. By evening all three brigades had withdrawn to an open field about a half mile to the rear where they rested on their arms for the night.⁵⁷ Grover's brigade had lost heavily; the Excelsior regiments, not so heavily engaged, had some casualties. The Fifth Regiment lost John M. Baker of Tidioute, killed, James S. Franklin, of the Cadets, so severely wounded that he was discharged for disability, March 6, 1863, in Washington, and Lieut. C. S. Preston (according to the *New York Tribune*, September 1) wounded in the arm and hospital-

⁵⁶ Cudworth, *op.cit.*, 271.

⁵⁷ *Official Records*, Series I, Vol. XII, 444-5.

ized at the Metropolitan Hotel in Washington. William C. Dithridge was missing in action. To be reported missing could make for more family heartbreak than to be reported dead. Dithridge's elder brother, George W. Dithridge, has left a moving account of one family's tragedy.

When war broke out William Dithridge was a little over seventeen and a senior at the Pittsburgh Central High School. Much to the distress of his father, he enlisted without waiting to graduate. He told his father that he recognized the power of parental authority to effect the discharge of minor sons, but . . . that he would kill himself if he were forced to remain at home; he could not become a deserter, and he would not accept the baby act in his behalf. The account continues:

. . . After that battle in August, 1862, the Confederates held the field and would not permit of burying parties to return and bury the dead, or to look for the wounded. No flag of truce on an errand of mercy was permitted on the ground fought over, and the wounded burned with an ever-rising fever were unquenched by a cup of merciful water until in delirium they died where they fell.

The last uncertain word that ever floated back of tidings of Wm. C. Dithridge was a report from a hard-pressed comrade that he saw one whom he thought to be he, leaning helpless and wounded against a tree.

A week after that severely contested fight . . . the Confederates were driven back and some newly enlisted Pennsylvania regiments (139th one), including many Pittsburgh companies, were sent forward to bury the derlict dead on the field where they lay. Not one of the fallen was recognizable by form or feature, but fragments of Pittsburgh papers on the field where the two Pittsburgh companies fought and a trampled envelope addressed to "William C. Dithridge" showed that here he had fought and died and somewhere near in an unnamed grave lies the unrecognizable body of him who gave his life

The fate of Wm. C. Dithridge remained uncertain until after the close of the war. A visit of his father to Washington and exhaustive efforts to determine his fate all ended in classifying him as "missing". For a long time it was hoped that he might be found a prisoner in one of the Confederate prisons, but this hope was modified by the known interval of a week between the day of the battle and the burial of the dead.⁵⁸

The Union forces devoted the morning of Saturday, August 30th, to preparations for a continuation of the battle of Friday. Between twelve and two o'clock the troops moved forward in attack over much of the same ground as the day before. This time the Excelsior regiments were used not as shock troops but as ready reserves to bolster the Union right as needed. Late in the afternoon the Confederate forces took the offensive and pressed so relentlessly that the Union left gave way and retreat was inevitable. Hooker's brigades

⁵⁸ George T. Fleming, *My High School Days* (Pittsburgh, 1904), 139-40.

had fallen back to a position west of the Warrenton Turnpike and just north of the Sudley Manassas Road. Nightfall ended the Second Battle of Bull Run, a defeat but not a rout, and the fought-out Union troops, after fording Bull Run, headed for the fortified position at Centerville. Excelsior losses were few and there was none among the Pittsburgh companies.

Sunday, August 31st, the Excelsior Brigade rested just east of Centerville where the Third Corps was being held in reserve. It had rained most of the night and was still raining. Though the men did not know it, they were to participate in just one more battle under Pope. Jackson, under orders from Lee, once again started an encircling movement around the Union right. In mud and rain on Sunday he crossed Bull Run at Sudley Spring, moved north to the Little River Turnpike and then turned east—destination Fairfax Court House. By mid-afternoon of September 1st Jackson's men reached Chantilly. This time Pope was not caught napping. At eleven o'clock on the 1st, he sent for Hooker and asked him to investigate and check the enemy advance. Hooker was in a dilemma. He had consulted his brigade commanders and had been informed that the men were in no condition to meet the enemy. His three brigades had lost 1209 men while serving under Pope⁵⁹ and were in no shape to serve as shock troops.

However, Hooker was sent to Germantown just west of Fairfax to take charge of the troops there. At the Battle of Chantilly his position was east of Difficult Run about a mile and a half from Germantown but his troops played small part in the battle. Stevenson puts the losses of the Excelsior Brigade at 45 but this seems an exaggeration.⁶⁰ The battle had been a setback for Jackson and Lee, but starting on September 2nd the Union troops retired to the defenses of Washington. The Excelsior regiments went into encampment about two miles from Alexandria, close to the spot where they had entrained for the ill-fated campaign only a week before. Their job now was to fill their depleted ranks as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

(To be continued)

⁵⁹ Hebert, *op.cit.*, 125-6.

⁶⁰ Stevenson, *op.cit.*, 36.