



History of the 12th New Hampshire Volunteer Infantry Regiment

By ASA W. BARTLETT, late Captain Twelfth Regiment New Hampshire Volunteer Infantry, and Historian of the Regiment.

The fact that this regiment sprang into potential existence in about three days, and that for three years lacking only three months it served in the armies of the Potomac and the James, where, by a loss of more than one third of its members in killed and wounded, it made for itself a record of valor and sacrifice unsurpassed, if equalled, by any other regiment of infantry in the Union army, is convincingly suggestive to the reader how inadequate and incomplete must be the brief skeleton sketch that can be given it in the limited space allotted here.

To the memory and honor of Colonels George W. Stevens and Thomas J. Whipple, of Laconia, more than to any other two or ten persons, belongs the credit of raising the regiment, -to the former, for originating the idea of raising it in Belknap county and adjoining towns, upon certain conditions precedent to be granted by Governor Berry, provided it should be ready for muster within ten days; and to the latter, assisted by his able coadjutor, for his great and successful efforts, as an orator, in so arousing the people to a proper sense of their duty and danger as to raise it in so short a time.

The long and bitter contest between Governor Berry and his advisers on one side, and Colonel Whipple and his friends, including the whole regiment and many prominent men of the State, on the other side, concerning who should be commissioned colonel, finally ended in the rejection of both Whipple and Stevens, whom the regiment had chosen to lead them, and the selection by the Governor of Joseph H. Potter, of Concord, then captain in the Seventh United States Regiment, and John F. Marsh, of Nashua, a captain the Sixth Wisconsin Volunteers, for colonel and lieutenant-colonel of the regiment.

The companies rendezvoused and were mustered into the United States service as they arrived at "Camp Belknap," on Concord plains, and left there for Washington, D. C., September 27, 1862.

It may be stated here that a thousand larger and more stalwart-looking men never marched down the main street of their capital city. More, perhaps, than any other regiment from the State, from having a greater proportion of the "sons of the soil," they represented the brawn, if not the brain, of its mountains and hills, and soon received the name of "The New Hampshire Mountaineers."

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Arriving at Washington on the morning of the 29th, the regiment went into camp the same day upon Arlington Heights, Va., about seven miles from the Capitol, where it remained under constant drill until the 17th of October, when it proceeded by rail to Knoxville, Md.; and nine days later, the 26th, it crossed the Potomac at Berlin, and became a part of the great moving column of Union soldiers known as the Army of the Potomac.

Proceeding southward to Falmouth, Va., by short yet wearisome marches-for the men were then tyros instead of heroes the regiment soon after went into its first battle at Fredericksburg, Va., receiving a savage introduction from the Confederate artillery, which cut two officers and seven men from its line December 12, before crossing the river. For the next three days it participated in the battle, greatly exposed to the enemy's batteries, but fortunately suffering but little loss. Two companies, C and F, left by mistake on picket when the army retreated, were rescued at the last moment by Colonel Marsh at great risk.

In this battle the Twelfth acted as an independent command in Whipple's division of the Third Corps, in the Centre Grand Division, commanded by Hooker.

The winter at Falmouth, following Burnside's bloody repulse, though unusually mild, was a severe one for the army, the Twelfth, in common with other regiments, losing sadly from sickness, as many as seven dying in a single night. The exposures and hardships of the Fredericksburg campaign and of the famous "Mud March" soon following, in which the regiment and the whole army labored hard, but in vain, to reach the enemy's lines once more, had doubtless much to do with increasing the rate of mortality.

May 2, 1863-a day never to be forgotten by a survivor of the Twelfth -- the campaign for that year with the Army of the Potomac opened with terrible earnestness at Chancellorsville, Va., where the regiment suffered severely, being the last regiment of the Third Corps, which bore the brunt of the fight, to retreat, and leaving nearly all its officers and more than half of the men dead or wounded on the field.

In this most desperate conflict, of the five hundred and forty-nine musket-bearers who went into the fight, only two (so far as the writer, after long and diligent search, has been able to find) escaped untouched. Those who were not killed or wounded had their clothes, blankets, or equipments torn with pieces of shell or pierced with bullets.

Two months later, after making one of the most trying marches of the war, found the regiment on the decisive battlefield of Gettysburg, where it was again baptized in blood. Its monument, now standing there, close by the Emmitsburgh road, truthfully proclaims to the passer-by that out of two hundred and twenty-four officers and men engaged, on July 2, 1863, twenty were killed and seventy-nine wounded, six mortally. The regiment was then in Carr's brigade and Humphrey's division of the Third Corps, commanded by General Sickles.

Leaving the battlefield on the 6th, the regiment followed, with the army, the retreating forces of General Lee, taking a part in the battle of Wapping Heights, until it reached Warrington, Va., where, on the 27th of July, it was detached, with the Second and Fifth New Hampshire regiments, from the Army of the Potomac and ordered to report at Point Lookout, Md., where it arrived on the 31st of the same month.

It remained there with the Second and Fifth, as a guard brigade of rebel prisoners under General Marston, until the opening of the spring campaign of 1864. It was here that the Twelfth received its first and last installment of recruits, if they can properly be called such.

Of the four hundred and forty assigned and accredited to the regiment, over sixty deserted before reaching it, one hundred were soon after transferred to the navy, and about one third of the remainder deserted before the end of the war. Yet it should be recorded, in justice to those left, that they made good soldiers, and many of them fell on the field of battle, twenty-eight being killed at Cold Harbor.

After leaving Point Lookout for Yorktown, Va., and while encamped at Williamsburgh, the regiment, on the 23d day of April, 1864, was assigned to General Wistar's brigade of Weitzel's division, in the Eighteenth Corps, commanded by Maj. Gen. W. F. Smith, which, together with the Tenth Corps under General Gilmore, composed General Butler's Army of the James, which on the 5th of May ascended that river to attack Richmond on the south, while General Lee was engaged in defending it against General Grant's approach from the north.

While in this command it participated in the battles of Swift Creek, Relay House or Fort Stevens, Drewry's Bluff, and Port Walthall, in all of which it suffered more or less severely, aggregating a loss in killed and wounded of about fifty men.

On the 29th of May the regiment boarded transports with the Eighteenth Corps at City Point, Va., for White House Landing, on the Pamunkey river, and on June 1 joined the Army of the Potomac confronting the enemy at Cold Harbor. On the 3d, it led its brigade, massed by divisions, in the terrible charge at

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that place, where nearly twenty thousand brave veterans of the Union army were killed or disabled without gaining ground enough from the enemy upon which to bury the dead. The Twelfth was crushed and hurled back as by an avalanche or a cyclone, having nearly half of its officers killed or mortally wounded, and losing over fifty per cent of the men who uncapped their pieces for the charge less than ten minutes before.

After remaining until the night of the 11th under the fire of the enemy's guns, losing in killed or wounded almost every day, the regiment, with its corps, returned to City Point, from which it marched immediately to the attack on Petersburg, and from the 15th of June to the 25th of August it was engaged in the memorable siege of that city, including the battle of the Mine Explosion, and was almost constantly, day and night, under the enemy's fire. Though its loss in numbers was comparatively small considering the length of time and great exposure, yet many fell; but none so much and long lamented as Chaplain Thomas L. Ambrose, who was mortally wounded by a rebel sharpshooter July 24, 1864.

After leaving the siege lines of Petersburg, the regiment occupied the lines of defense at Bermuda Hundred; north of the James' upon Chaffin's farm; and at or near Fort Harrison during the fall and winter of 1864-5. During this time it occupied many different positions, and served in three or four different brigade and division commands, the last being in the Second Brigade, Third Division of the Twenty-fourth Army Corps' in which it remained until the close of the war.

On the 17th of November, at the "Gate-Way" (so called), on the Bermuda front, a picket detail of fifty men from the regiment successfully resisted a determined midnight attack of the enemy, until the "Hundred Day" regiments giving way upon both its flanks, left it to be surrounded by the enemy, and two officers and thirty-five men of the regiment to be captured and sent to Libby prison, in Richmond, from which two - Benjamin Thompson and Albert W. Bachelor -soon after escaped and returned safely to the regiment. In this affair one officer and six men were wounded.

On the memorable morning of April 3, 1865, a detail from the Twelfth, under the command of Captain Bohonon, who was the first man of the picket line to mount the enemy's works, were among the pickets of the Second Brigade, who claim, with much reason, to be the first infantry troops to enter Richmond.

The regiment, after doing provost and guard duty for a while in Richmond and Manchester, on the other side of the river, was detached from the rest of the corps, and sent to Danville, Va., on special duty, and Colonel Barker, for a time, was put in command of the sub-district of the city of Danville and adjoining counties, some of his line officers acting as provost marshals for the different counties.

June 13, 1865, the regiment returned from Danville to Manchester, Va., and was mustered out of the United States service at Richmond, June 21, 1865.

The next day, what was left of the original organization-the recruits having been transferred to the Second Regiment- started for home, reaching Boston by steamer on the 25th, and arriving at Concord about sunset on the 27th. The train was delayed by reception accident at Hooksett, by which several were slightly injured, and at Nashua and Manchester and by an Chaplain Higgins had a leg broken.

July 3 the officers and men were paid off, and the 4th was "Independence Day" indeed, to them, for they were not only enjoying the unrestricted pleasures and privileges of home, but were freemen on their native soil once more, where, like Cincinnatus, they could henceforth "greatly independent live."

The Twelfth Regiment, during its term of service, was commanded as follows: From Concord, N. H., to Chancellorsville, Va., by Col. Joseph H. Potter, ably assisted by Lieut. Col. John F. Marsh, who had much to do with the care and discipline of the regiment.

Both of these officers were severely wounded in that battle, and Colonel Marsh never returned to the regiment for service afterward. Colonel Potter returned in September, 1864, but was at once assigned to the command of a brigade.

On the march to Gettysburg, and in the first part of the regiment's engagement there, it was under the command of Capt. John F. Langley. He also assumed command again after the regiment was detached from the Army of the Potomac, and continued so while it remained at Point Lookout, and at different times while on the march or in camp after joining the Army of the James.

On the 4th day of July, 1863, on the field of Gettysburg, Capt. Thomas E. Barker first took command of the regiment; and from that date until it was disbanded at Concord, July 3, 1865, except for the time above referred to, he had both the honor and the responsibility of leading the regiment into every battle in which it was engaged, from Gettysburg to Richmond, and into the city itself.

It should also be stated that Lieut. Edwin E. Bedee commanded awhile upon, and took what was left of the regiment from, the field of Chancellorsville, and that Capt. William F. Fernal acted a similar part in the engagement of the regiment on the second day at Gettysburg.

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The organizations in which the regiment served during the war, with dates of assignment etc., are concisely stated as follows.

The Twelfth New Hampshire Volunteers was attached to Wright's Brigade, Casey's Division, Defenses of Washington, September 30, 1862, Whipple's Division, Defenses of Washington, October 5, 1862; with Whipple's Division to Twelfth Army Corps, October 22, 1862; detached with Whipple's Division from Twelfth Army Corps, October 29, 1862; attached with Whipple's (Third) Division to Third Army Corps, November 16, 1862; Second Brigade, Third Division, Third Army- Corps, January 17, 1863; First Brigade, Second Division, Third Army Corps, June 11 to July 26, 1863; in District of St. Mary's, Department of Virginia and North Carolina, July 31, 1863, to April 23, 1864; attached to Wistar's Brigade, Department of Virginia and North Carolina, April 12, 1864; Second Brigade, Second Division, Eighteenth Army Corps, April 23, 1864; Potter's Provisional Brigade, Defenses of Bermuda Hundred, Army of the James, September 20, 1864; Third Brigade, First Division, Eighteenth Army Corps, October 8, 1864; Potter's Provisional Brigade, Defenses of Bermuda Hundred, Army of the James, October 14, 1864; Second Brigade, Third Division, Twenty-fourth Army Corps, December 4, 1864.

Organized: Concord, NH on 9/1/62
Mustered Out: 6/21/65 at Richmond, VA

Officers Killed or Mortally Wounded: 11
Officers Died of Disease, Accidents, etc.: 1
Enlisted Men Killed or Mortally Wounded: 170
Enlisted Men Died of Disease, Accidents, etc.: 138
(Source: Fox, Regimental Losses)



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