

150 Years Ago in the Third Infantry

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Introduction

The regimental staff and band and Companies B, D, F, G, H, I, and K of the Third Infantry are stationed in Franklin Square in Washington City and serving as part of the City Guard. Companies C and E have been part of the garrison defending Fort Pickens, Florida, since April 1861, and will not return to the regiment until mid-June. Companies A, F, and I, which were captured in Matagorda Bay, Texas, before they even knew war had broken out, are slowly filling with recruits at Fort Columbus, New York, and in fact Companies F and I had rejoined the regiment in Washington City in mid-February. The two companies were not allowed to bring their laundresses or other wives and children from New York, and in anticipation of the Army of the Potomac taking the field, during the last half of February the wives and children of the five companies who fought at Bull Run were removed from the camps and issued vouchers to allow them to draw rations from the commissary.

March 1862

March 1, 1862

Musician Cornelius Murphy of Company C is killed at Fort Pickens by the accidental discharge of a musket. (Regt Return)

March 3, 1862

The Senate unanimously confirms the appointment of Colonel Charles F. Smith as a Major-General, United States Volunteers, in recognition of his role in the capture of Fort Donelson in February. Almost immediately after the capture, Major General Henry Halleck, commander of the Department of the Missouri, telegraphed Major General George McClellan to secure the appointment for Colonel Smith: "By his coolness and bravery at Fort Donelson when the battle was against us, [he] turned the tide and carried the enemy's outworks; make him a Major-General. You can't get a better one. Honor him for this victory, and the country will applaud." In further recognition of his heroism, the City of Philadelphia orders the preparation of a sword of honor for its native son.

Also at General Halleck's insistence, command of the expeditionary force moving up the Tennessee River is given to General Smith instead of General Grant. Unfortunately, the accolades and honors for General Smith are short lived. When trying to transfer from his steamer to an adjacent yawl at Savannah, Tennessee, General Smith misses his foothold and badly injures the bone of the lower part of his right leg. Before the end of the month he is confined to his bed in his quarters at Savannah and reluctantly gives up command of the expeditionary force. (RR 4:47; Cullum 1:#410)

March 6, 1862

President Abraham Lincoln submits to the Senate a list of recommendations for brevet promotions for the regular officers of the garrison at Fort Pickens, Florida, in recognition of their heroism and gallantry during the siege of their post. Eighteen officers are recommended for promotion, including the two officers of the Third Infantry at the post. Captain John McLean Hildt is recommended to be a major by brevet, to date from October 9, 1861, the date of the Confederate surprise attack against the camp of the Sixth New York. First Lieutenant Alexander N. Shipley is recommended to be a captain by brevet, to date from November 23, 1861, the date of the first bombardment between the opposing forces. The Senate does not

confirm the brevet ranks. Instead, Hildt will obtain that brevet major rank in recognition of his gallant and meritorious services at the Battles of Gaines' Mill and Malvern Hill. (Wash Star 3/6/62 2:2; Cullum #1756)

March 8, 1862

Union troops, this time under the command of Major General George McClellan, begin their second attempt to breach the Confederate defenses at the strategic rail center of Manassas Junction. This time no rout occurs. In fact, there isn't even a battle as the Confederates begin withdrawing on March 9th to new positions near the Rappahannock River.

March 10, 1862

The Regimental Headquarters, band, and Companies B, D, F, G, H, I and K leave Washington City to join the Army of the Potomac in northern Virginia. The regiment is included in a brigade of Regular infantry commanded by Brigadier General George Sykes, who was merely the captain of Company K less than one year ago. In addition to the battalion of the Third Infantry, the brigade consists of nine companies of the 2d, ten companies of the 4th, ten companies of the 6th, a battalion of eight companies of the 10th and 17th, six companies of the 11th, eight companies of the 12th, and nine companies of the 14th U.S. Infantry Regiments. The 11th, 12th, 14th, and 17th Infantries are referred to as the new regiments since they were organized after the start of hostilities. Of the old army representatives, the Third Infantry traces its lineage to 1784, and the 10th Infantry is the youngest having been formed in 1855. The Eighth Infantry is also represented in the Army of the Potomac, but Major General George McClellan retains it and a portion of the 17th Infantry for service at his headquarters as part of the provost guard. (Regt Return; OR I 5:19)

The battalion's transfer to service with the Army in the field ends its role as part of the provost guard of Washington; a duty that was faithfully performed since August 1, 1861. General McClellan complemented the Regulars for their service as part of the City Guard in the final report on his command of the Army. "The energy and ability displayed by Col. A. Porter, the provost-marshal, and his assistants, and the strict discharge of their duty by the troops, produced the best results and Washington soon became one of the most quiet cities in the Union." (OR I 5:12)

Tracing its route of a year earlier along the Columbia Pike and the Little River Turnpike, the battalion finally goes into camp about 9:00 p.m. Second Lieutenant John Page, recently joined from absent sick, fondly remembered the battalion's departure from Washington City: "The band struck up a merry tune, the regiment broke into columns of platoons; when in view of the Ebbitt and Willard Hotels we could see the windows were a mass of waving handkerchiefs, fans and parasols; when near enough a shower of bouquets greeted us; here and there a dusky messenger boy darted between the ranks, handed a favored youth a parting flower and billet doux containing words of affection and God-speed. When the columns reached Long Bridge, the music was hushed. As Sykes' command came back to us, to route step, break step, march, I became an atom of that grand and glorious, patriotic, patient, and persevering Army of the Potomac."

Captain John Wilkins of Company F, while a veteran of many marches during the Mexican War and on the frontier, is taking part in his first large Army movement of the Civil War. He described a less enchanting experience caused by the collection of these atoms of the Army of the Potomac: "Although we had only marched about five miles I was on my feet the whole day [as] the road was so crowded with wagons and artillery that we moved at a snails pace." One of the Regular enlisted men had still a third view of the occasion: "It was my hard luck to be corporal of the guard bringing up the rear of the column with a few prisoners and some drunks who had been unable to resist the temptation of a final debauch. I had some trouble to keep

them from frolicking with the Negro wenches who had lined up on the sidewalks in large numbers to hear the band play and see us marching off."

The battalion has 16 officers and approximately 440 enlisted men present for duty under the command of Major Nathan Rossell. The company commanders are as follows: Company F: Captain John D. Wilkins (West Point Class of 1846); Company I: Captain John W. Walker (West Point Class of 1856); Company H: First Lieutenant Andrew Sheridan (appointed March 23, 1861); Company B: First Lieutenant William Penrose (appointed April 13, 1861); Company D: Captain Francis A. Davies of the 16th Infantry (West Point Class of May 1861); Company G: First Lieutenant John B. Williams (West Point Class of May 1861); and Company K: Second Lieutenant John Whitney (appointed August 5, 1861). Second Lieutenant Frederick Devoe (appointed from the Army October 24, 1861) is the adjutant and First Lieutenant Joseph A. McCool (appointed April 26, 1861) is the quartermaster. The entire brigade of Regular infantry boasts 153 officers and 3,752 enlisted men present for duty. (Batt Return; OR I 11(3):53, Page, MOLLUS, 15; Wilkins 3/16/62; Meyers 195-96)

March 11, 1862

The battalion of the Third Infantry continues its march along the Little River Turnpike in northern Virginia and finally encamps within two miles of Fairfax. Recent rains have turned the turnpike into mud and Company F is assigned to duty to assist the brigade wagons. The soldiers first use of their heavily loaded knapsacks in months, and in the case of recent enlistees their first experience with the contraptions at all, is quickly evident. The pauses along the march are used to dispense with those things the soldiers think they can live without. Some of the first items abandoned are the poles and pins for the shelter halves, the soldiers trusting "to chance to pick up forked sticks and ridge-poles in the woods." Even the acting field officer, Captain John D. Wilkins of Company F, must have a tentmate, and he shares a small tent with quartermaster First Lieutenant Joseph A. McCool. (Regt Return; Wilkins 3/16/62, 6/22/62; Meyers 195&197)

March 14, 1862

With the bloodless capture of Manassas Junction by the advance elements of the Army of the Potomac, Major General George McClellan is authorized to put into effect his plan to transfer the Army by water to the peninsula between the York and James Rivers. The battalion of the Third Infantry leaves its advanced camp near Fairfax at 5:00 a.m. and moves closer to Alexandria, Virginia, the embarkation point for the troops. The new camp is located three miles west of Alexandria and named Camp Sykes in honor of the brigade commander. The battalion and another rain storm arrive at the new camp about noon. The rain, turning to snow and sleet in the evening, continues until morning. In a letter to his wife, Captain Wilkins described the result: "The mud in camp is about two feet deep. The poor soldiers had nothing but 'shelter tents' which amount to about a yard of brown linen, and for hours and hours they stood in the cold pelting rain unable to get a fire even to burn." Despite many years service in the Mexican War and New Mexico, Captain Wilkins considers the weather and suffering of this night to be the worst he has ever seen.

Second Lieutenant Charles B. Atchison of Company F draws the unpleasant duty of Officer of the Guard and spends a sleepless night in the rain. When he made his midnight round of the guard posts, he appeared "with a blanket wrapped around his head and the big tears of rain dropping from his face." Captain Wilkins confided to his wife that Lieutenant Atchison looked like the "little end of nothing whittled to a point." The guard is without a tent for shelter and spent the night "sitting on logs around a fire that would not burn and blinded us with smoke." (Regt Return; Wilkins 3/16/62; Meyers 198)

March 17, 1862

The first units of the Army of the Potomac embark on transports at Alexandria.

March 24, 1862

In General Order No. 102, Headquarters Army of the Potomac, Major General George McClellan introduces a system of flags to designate and distinguish the various brigades, divisions, and army corps under his command. The flag of the Regular Brigade of infantry under General George Sykes is intended to contain a white star on a red field six feet long and five feet wide. The numbers of the nine regiments included in the brigade are to be printed on the star. The flag is required to be attached to a portable staff 14 feet long and habitually displayed at General Syke's headquarters or near him whenever on the march. On April 30th, the order regarding flags is modified to the extent of requiring a blue field rather than a red field for the Regular infantry. It is unknown whether this flag ever graced General Syke's headquarters. (OR I 11(3):35,129)

March 26, 1862

The battalion leaves Camp Sykes to join the exodus at Alexandria. Because of the crowds, the battalion is forced to wait five hours in the street before finally boarding the steam transport Elm City about dark. The transport is one of the most elegant and fastest of the New York harbor fleet, but the soldiers of the battalion have little chance to enjoy its amenities. They must share the vessel with the 14th Infantry, two companies of the 17th Infantry, and General Sykes and his staff. In all the Elm City holds about 1300 officers and enlisted men, and Captain Wilkins of Company F observes that "to say that the soldiers were 'as thick as hops' wouldn't half convey the idea." During the night, a person cannot move in the cabins at all as every available inch of floor space is occupied.

The steamer joins a fleet of seven steamers, each with two barges in tow, early on March 27th for the voyage down the Potomac River and the Chesapeake Bay. As the boats pass Mount Vernon, home of George Washington, the ships' bell tolled and the troops were ordered to remove their caps as a mark of respect for the Father of their Country. Their destination is Fortress Monroe, a large star-shaped fortification at the point of the James Peninsula. The fort remained in Federal hands when Virginia seceded in April 1861 and becomes the base of operations for General McClellan's drive to Richmond. The anticipation of an imminent "fight or foot race", puts Captain Wilkins in a reflective mood and he assures his wife that: "I will act, as you would like me, the part of a brave man, if it is in me." (Regt Return; Wilkins 3/27/62; Meyers 200)

One of the officers with the battalion is unable to make the voyage on account of sickness. Captain Francis A. Davies of the 16th Infantry returns to Washington City for a short period upon the departure of the battalion. Since November 1861, Captain Davies has been temporarily attached to and commanding Company D. He will return to the field in April. In his absence, Company D is under the command of First Lieutenant Daingerfield Parker of Company E. (Batt Return)

March 26, 1862

Before receiving his commission in 1857, Lieutenant Alexander Shipley was the quartermaster sergeant of the First Infantry. His ability in this area is still recognized by his superiors and he is promoted to captain and assistant quartermaster in the Regular Army. His commander at Fort Pickens, Colonel Harvey Brown, first recommended the appointment on December 12th and has used him since that date in the Quartermaster Department. He is currently acting as Chief Quartermaster and Commissary of Subsistence for Fort Pickens and the Military District of Florida. He accepts the promotion on May 5th and vacates his appointment as a line officer in the Third Infantry. (S837 CB 1865)

March 28, 1862

The battalion disembarks at Fortress Monroe and encamps a short distance away near Hampton, Virginia. On this flat plain along the James River most of the newly arrived troops are encamped and "many thousands of tents stretched away as far as the eye could reach in the direction of Newport News." (Regt Return; Meyers 201)

March 29, 1862

Captain John D. Wilkins' is appointed as an acting field officer (major) of the Third Infantry pursuant to Special Order No. 13, headquarters Sykes' Brigade. However, he also continues to command Company F. (Regt Return)