

April 1862

April 3, 1862

A rumor is making the rounds of the camp of the Third Infantry near Hampton, Virginia, that Major Nathan B. Russell is to be appointed a Brigadier General of Volunteers and command a portion of the Regular infantry reserve of the Army of the Potomac. The rumor turns out to be just that, since Major Russell is outranked by Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Buchanan of the Fourth Infantry, Major William Chapman of the Second Infantry, and Major Charles S. Lovell of the Tenth Infantry also in the field with Sykes' brigade. In fact, Major Chapman will shortly outrank Major Russell in the Third Infantry as Major Chapman will soon receive notice of his promotion to the lieutenant colonelcy of the Third Infantry. When two brigades of Regular infantry are formed in May 1862, Lieutenant Colonel Buchanan and Major Chapman receive the commands.

Major Russell joined the Third Infantry in the field in January, and the officers and men of Companies B, D, F, G, H, I, and K under his immediate command have begun to form an opinion of their commanding officer. In a private letter to his wife, Captain John Wilkins describes Major Russell as a good and model officer who is extremely correct in his habits. These positive attributes are tempered, however, by Major Russell's extreme nervousness and dislike of 'rough service'. Captain Wilkins illustrates these drawbacks with several anecdotes: "If he hears us laughing at night he always wants to know what is the matter. If there is any noise in his vicinity he sends for the officer of the day to know what is going on. We talk in whispers, and such things as singing a song has become a 'heinous offense.' He is very prim in his dress, and if he gets a little muddy never rests until it is removed. Lucky for him he rides horseback. He spends most of his time 'scrubbing himself'." (Wilkins 4/3&28/62)

April 4, 1862

Major General George McClellan and the Army of the Potomac begin their march up the Peninsula from their camps around Fortress Monroe. General McClellan has available 58,000 men in two divisions of the Third Corps, two divisions of the Fourth Corps, one division of the Second Corps, and a reserve of artillery, cavalry, and General Syke's brigade of Regular infantry. The Regular brigade is truly the reserve as it is the last unit to move and follows the division of the Second Corps. The Regular infantry brigade leaves its camps at Hampton at 8:30 a.m. and marches by the New Market Bridge to Big Bethel, site of a skirmish in June 1861.

The Regular infantry brigade continues its advance with the Army the next morning in a torrential rain as far as the home of a Doctor Powers on the main Yorktown Road, about seven miles east of Yorktown. Private Warren Lee Goss took part in this march and wrote afterward that "the muddy roads, cut up and kneaded, as it were, by the teams preceding us, left them in a state of semi-liquid filth hardly possible to describe or imagine". The "rapid movements" of the Army contemplated by General McClellan come to an even more abrupt halt, however, when it is discovered that the Warwick River crosses the Warwick Road, route of the Fourth Corps, instead of merely paralleling the road as erroneously assumed. The required river crossing, against formidable Confederate works covering it, shatters the original plan to simply bypass the Confederate stronghold of Yorktown. Although as of late March the Confederates had only 10,000 men in the Peninsula available for duty, General McClellan is unaware of this fact and unwilling to risk an assault in an attempt to overcome this unanticipated obstacle to the advance. (OR I 11(1):7-10; (3):393; B&L II (Goss 190))

April 6, 1862

The Battle of Shiloh begins in southern Tennessee. Colonel Charles F. Smith of the Third Infantry, Major General of Volunteers and hero of the capture of Fort Donelson, is notable by his absence on account of his leg injury in March and severe complications from his treatment. Although Colonel Smith had hoped to resume command of the Second Division of General Grant's Army even if it compelled him "to be carried about the expected battlefield in a hand litter," he is forced to remain in his sick-bed in Savannah, Tennessee, a few miles from the battlefield. Shortly after the battle, he tries to explain his feelings to a friend: "Imagine if it is possible, my feelings—but no, that is impossible—lying here bedridden with my injured leg, and excessive bodily weakness, listening for two days to the sounds of battle, the roar of artillery, the rattle of musketry, without being able to take my proper part in it." (Cullum 1:410)

One officer of the Third Infantry, however, does participate in the battle. Captain Alexander McDowell McCook of Company E began the war as a first lieutenant and currently commands the Second Division of the Army of the Ohio as a Brigadier General of Volunteers. This Army, under the command of General Don Carlos Buell, reinforces and assists General Grant's troops on the second day of the battle. General McCook's division marches 22 miles this day and reaches Savannah at 7:00 p.m. as the first day's fighting grinds to a halt. Arriving at the steamboat landing, General McCook finds that no arrangements have been made to ferry his troops to the battlefield. Forcibly commandeering steamboats at the landing, he brings the three brigades of his division across the Tennessee River and to the front in time to be in position when the Confederates resume their attack on April 7th. His division performs admirably in its first battle and suffers casualties of 93 killed, 803 wounded, and only nine missing. General Buell in his report places General McCook's name at the head of those officers commended for "gallantry and good conduct." (OR I G72XXXK; Report USMA 1904:47-48)

April 7, 1862

After two days of "close personal reconnaissances of the right and left of the enemy's positions", General McClellan concludes that heavy guns and some siege operations will be necessary to breach the Confederate defenses. He characterizes the whole line of the Warwick River as strongly defended by detached redoubts and other fortifications. Indeed, the river is a natural obstacle that has been improved by the construction of five dams to deepen the water. The headwaters of the river are less than two miles from Yorktown, and the open area between the river and the town has been filled with two redoubts connected by trenches. Yorktown itself is described by General McClellan as strongly fortified, armed, and garrisoned. However, the Confederate commander, General John Magruder, has only 5000 troops available at this time to occupy the 11 miles of the Warwick line. Fortunately for the Confederates, General McClellan is unaware of this fact and by continually magnifying the number of the enemy arrayed against him concludes that "instant assault would have been simple folly." Instead, he commits the Army of the Potomac to a month of trench building in rain and mud. (OR I 11(1):11; Arthur 47-49)

April 10, 1862

While the Regular brigade is encamped near Doctor Powers, a rainstorm begins during the night and lasts almost 48 hours. The troops quickly discover that their dog tents do not remain waterproof in such a deluge. "As we lay in our tents we watched the globules of water oozing through the thin canvas; and to keep them from dripping in our faces, we would put up our fingers to touch the drop and guide it along the sloping side of the tent." To restore the waterproofing qualities of the tents, some of the men smear a mixture of pork grease and melted tallow upon the canvas.

This practice "improved them for a time at the expense of their looks, for all the dust and dirt flying about clung to them." The resulting smell must have been something too. While the regiment's annual return of movements for 1862 gives no name to this camp, the soldiers remember it as "Camp Misery." (Meyers 204&207)

April 12, 1862

The brigade of Regular infantry leaves its camp at Doctor Powers and establishes a new camp a short distance from McClellan's headquarters in front of Yorktown. So far, the Third Infantry has advanced 22 miles toward Richmond. The new camp is named Camp Winfield Scott and is shielded by a fringe of woods from the view of the Confederate fortifications less than two miles away. Well within range of the heavy artillery at Yorktown, drum and bugle calls, band concerts, and campfires after dark are prohibited in order to prevent the Confederates from determining the exact location of the camp.

While encamped at Camp Winfield Scott, the Regulars take part in siege operations. Before work on the trenches could begin, the necessary siege guns and supplies had to be hauled from the Army's central supply depot at Shipping Point on the York River. Half of the regiment works each day to prepare corduroy roads capable of bearing the great weight of the siege guns. An enlisted man in the Regular brigade recalled, none too fondly, this difficult labor: "We cut down trees, trimmed them and dragged the logs to their places; we filled in low spots and dug ditches to drain water from swampy sections, often standing in mud and water to do it. At about noon we were allowed an hour's rest to make coffee and eat our rations. About sundown we quit work and returned to camp, very tired and glad that we could rest all of the next day, while the other half of the regiment was at work." (Regt Return; Meyers 204-207)

April 14, 1862

Strict orders exist in the Army of the Potomac against conveying in private correspondence any information regarding military activities before Yorktown. Captain John Wilkins of Company F informs his wife in Washington City that all he can tell her about the campaign is that he "well and hearty, a little tired of salt pork and hard bread, but as cheerful under the circumstances as the time allows." Even without the prohibition, he would have little of military value to convey: "I learn much more from the newspapers than I can hear in camp. I find others about as wise as myself and even at headquarters 'nobody knows nothing'." (Wilkins 4/14&21/62)

April 17, 1862

Groundbreaking occurs during the night for Batteries Nos. 1, 2, 3 of the Union siege of Yorktown. The three divisions of the Third Army Corps (Porter's, Hooker's and Hamilton's) and the brigade of Regular infantry under General George Sykes are used as laborers in the construction of the batteries and supporting trenches. (OR I 11(1):314; Arthur 51)

April 21, 1862

In a letter home, Captain John Wilkins informs his wife that he recently saw a former officer of the Third Infantry, William H. Wood, who is now a major of the 17th Infantry. Major Wood spent almost 15 years in the Third Infantry after his graduation from the United States Military Academy in 1845. He obtained his promotion to major of one of the new regiments in May 1861 only one month after receiving his captaincy in the Third Infantry. He is currently the senior Assistant Provost Marshal General of the Army of the Potomac under Provost Marshal General Andrew Porter. Upon the departure of General Porter in July, Major Wood will be in charge of the Provost Marshal's Department until after the battle of Antietam.

The appearance of Major Wood leads Captain John Wilkins to consider his own possibilities for advancement. After all, Major Wood graduated from the United States Military Academy only one year before Captain Wilkins, both officers previously enjoyed promotions at approximately the same time, and both officers served as regimental adjutants. Although Captain Wilkins sees no chance of getting anything from the War Department, he tells his wife that he will apply for the next vacant paymastership: "I find so many 'Majors' about that I wouldn't object to being one." (Wilkins 4/21&28/62; OR I 5:30; Cullum 2:1267)

April 25, 1862

Colonel C.F. Smith dies in Savannah, Tennessee, of dysentery contracted while he was an invalid in that city. The Obituary Order issued by Major General Henry Halleck is as follows: "[Colonel Smith] had been in the service of his country for more than forty years, and had passed through all the military grades from Cadet to Major-General. He had fought with distinction in nearly all the battles of Mexico, and by his gallantry and skill had gained imperishable laurels at the Siege of Fort Donelson. He combined the qualities of a faithful officer, an excellent disciplinarian, an able commander, and a modest, courteous gentleman. In his death the army has lost one of its brightest ornaments, and the country a general whose place it will be difficult to supply." (Cullum 1:410)

April 25, 1862

Work commences on the first parallel trench to link the advanced Union batteries facing Yorktown. The parallel, twelve feet wide, three feet deep and only 1500 yards from the Confederate works, begins at the York River and extends westward across the main road toward the Warwick River. The work on the parallel and additional batteries continues day and night despite inclement weather and a desultory Confederate artillery fire. Few Union guns fire in response as General McClellan intends to reserve his heavy siege guns until all fortifications are complete and he can open fire with all 114 cannons simultaneously.

Although no member of the Third Infantry is killed or wounded during the siege of Yorktown, the 'rough service' takes its toll on the officers and men of the Third Infantry. So many officers are ill that on several days only six or eight officers, out of 16 present with the battalion, have been available for drill. The most severely afflicted officer is First Lieutenant Daingerfield Parker of Company E who leaves the regiment with a sick leave. Suffering from some sort of fever, he will not rejoin the command until July 7th at Harrison's Landing after the Seven Day's Battles. Second Lieutenant Charles B. Atchison, while remaining with the regiment, has been sick almost since his arrival on the Peninsula and unable to perform his company duties. Even Major Nathan Rossell has been ill. He had an abscess in his mouth for several days that puffed out his checks until he looked like a baby. Captain Thomas Walker of Company I, suffers periodic bouts of illness during the campaign, and will be listed on both the May and July regimental returns as "present sick". (Wilkins 4/28/62; Meyers 205-06; Arthur 55, 57)

April 26, 1862

A detail from the battalion of the Third Infantry in front of Yorktown spends an unpleasant tour of night duty with pick axes and spades working on the first parallel near the York River. The Regulars are assigned "the most exposed portion", and wait concealed in a nearby woods until it is dark enough to safely emerge from cover. The outline of the parallel is marked by pegs and lines set out by the engineers and the work party begins by digging a wide trench, throwing the dirt forward to create a small breastwork. The men are cautioned to make as little noise as possible, and of course, no talking is allowed. The men do not have to be told twice while in such an exposed position: "They worked very hard indeed until they had dug a hole deep enough to lie down in, then they took it easier." Only privates are required to dig, but the noncommissioned officers with a detail usually helped, having an interest in making a hole for themselves.

One of the officers of the Third Infantry is in charge of the working party. Pursuant to Special Order No. 119 of the Headquarters of the Army of the Potomac, the officer in charge of a trench or battery work party is "directly responsible for the constancy and industry of the labor performed and the strictness of adherence to the plans and instructions of the engineer of constructing officer."

By daylight, the parallel is well underway and the men are under cover. A steady rain fell throughout the night and the detail finally returns to Camp Winfield Scott with mud up to their knees. Two days later the Regulars begin work on another battery near the York River designed to reach the Yorktown water batteries and the defenses at Gloucester Point. Brigadier General David Birney, General of the Trenches today, reports that the work "was pushed through vigorously by the detail from General Sykes' brigade."

The Confederates keep up a harassing fire, chiefly small shell with an occasional solid shot or mortar round, against the laborers which is largely ineffective. An enlisted man explained how they dealt with this added inconvenience: "When the gun was fired at Yorktown a mile or more away, there was a flash in the sky and a sergeant on watch called out 'Lie down!' when we immediately dropped flat on the ground or in the trench. About the time we heard the report of the gun, the shell was passing over us."(OR I 11(1):388; OR I 11(3):118,123,129; Regt Return; Wilkins 4/28/62; Meyers 205&206)

April 28, 1862

Second Lieutenant George B. Butler Jr. of Company A marries Emily Butterworth at Calvary Church in New York City in a ceremony officiated by the Reverend Hawks. Company A was one of the three companies of the Third Infantry captured in Texas in April 1861 and is the only company of the regiment that is not currently in the field. The paroled enlisted men of the company have yet to be exchanged and its few new enlistees were transferred from Company A in February to fill the ranks of Companies F and I. In consequence, Lieutenant Butler has been serving on recruiting duty almost from the moment he joined Company A last September.

Lieutenant Butler's assignment with the Recruiting Service apparently gave the 24-year-old ample time to court the former Miss Butterworth. She is the daughter of Samuel F. Butterworth, a prominent attorney in New York City. Interestingly, the then prospective father-in-law wrote the Adjutant General on January 24th in an attempt obtain the transfer of his daughter's suitor to field duty: "I have a young friend, George Butler, he is a gallant, ambitious young man, and is exceedingly anxious to be attached to some regiment where he can participate in the War. I ask of you as a personal favor that you will give him a chance in the field, you will promote the public service and at the same time oblige an old friend." (LRCB 568 B 1862; Pension Application; NYTimes 5/1/62 5:4)

April 30, 1862

Union Battery No. 1, opposite the Confederate defenses at Yorktown, opens fire on the Yorktown wharf, driving off the enemy schooners and stopping all operations in that area. This is the battery that was constructed by work details drawn from Sykes' Regular brigade. General McClellan describes the results as "quite satisfactory". Realizing that Union preparations for the bombardment of the Yorktown defenses are almost complete, and having delayed the Union advance for most of the month (the Union troops had "corduroyed every road and bridged every creek" and "our guns and mortars were in position"), the Confederates begin to abandon Yorktown. The Confederate withdrawal is intended to be completed by May 3rd, but heavy rains prevent the last troops from leaving the lines until shortly before dawn on May 4th. (OR I 11(3):129; Arthur 58; B&L II (Goss 194))