

## 150 Years Ago in the Third Infantry

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### May 1862

#### May 3, 1862

The Confederate heavy guns at Yorktown, Virginia, fire at the Union lines throughout the day. While Major General George McClellan fears that the bombardment is a prelude to an enemy assault, the random fire is actually intended to mask the sounds of the complete evacuation of the Warwick and Yorktown defenses. Little of military value is left behind by the Confederates except the heavy guns that are too difficult to remove silently. By dawn on May 4th, the withdrawal is completed.

The Union troops react to word of the bloodless victory with great delight: "There was great cheering in all the camps as they received the news, the bands, silent for a month, played patriotic airs like mad, and as though they would never have another chance to play." General McClellan, whose grand bombardment and assault are not scheduled to begin until May 6th, is caught without plans for the pursuit of the enemy. It is not until the afternoon of May 4th, that Union cavalry and two Army Corps begin to follow the route of the retreating Confederates. The soldiers are unconcerned about the delay, and when General McClellan and his staff appear among the Regulars enroute to Yorktown, "we threw our caps into the air and cheered him to the echo, for he was our 'Little Mac,' our 'Napoleon,' our 'Little Corporal'." (Arthur 58; Meyers 209)

#### May 5, 1862

The brigade of Regular infantry does not participate in the initial pursuit of the Confederates from Yorktown, nor in the rear-guard action that erupts when the two armies meet near Williamsburg. During the battle, Major General George McClellan orders the troops remaining in the siege camps, including the Regular infantry, to take position between Yorktown and Williamsburg in case reinforcements or a rallying point is needed. With the end the battle at nightfall, the orders are changed: "[General McClellan] says if the regulars have not broken up their camp, and the other troops which have been placed under your [General Fitz John Porter] command to-night, that all but one brigade might remain in the camps." The Regular infantry is permitted to remain at Camp Winfield Scott under orders to move at a moments notice. Although General McClellan anticipates moving forward these remaining troops "as soon as matters are developed" at Williamsburg, it is not until May 9th that the advance recommences. By this time, there is little likelihood of another clash with the Confederate rear guard. (OR I 11(3):141&143; Wilkins 5/6/62)

#### May 9, 1862

While President Abraham Lincoln meets with Major General George McClellan at his Yorktown headquarters in an attempt to encourage the reluctant general to greater activity, the brigade of Regular infantry finally leaves nearby Camp Winfield Scott to join the renewed advance on Richmond. After marching about 12 miles, the brigade encamps near Fort Magruder, site of the recent Battle of Williamsburg. Few signs remain from the battle, the dead soldiers and horses having been buried, but the trees and earthworks offer mute testimony to the severity of the fire. The brigade continues its march on May 10th toward Roper's Church on the main road toward White House on the Pamunkey River. (Regt Return; Meyers 210)

### **May 10, 1862**

Although the Confederates have abandoned the north shore of Pensacola Bay the evening before, thus officially ending the 16-month siege of Fort Pickens, Brigadier General Lewis G. Arnold is unable to occupy the area for the Union since he has no steamer or other vessel to move his command. Fortunately, Union Commodore David D. Porter arrives at the fort early in the morning, having observed last night's fire while on blockade duty near Mobile Bay. He places his vessel, the Harriet Lane at General Arnold's service to ferry part of the garrison of Fort Pickens across the bay.

Companies C and E of the Third Infantry are among the first troops sent to the mainland. These companies landed at Fort Pickens on April 16, 1861, and this is the first time they have left the limited confines of Santa Rosa Island since that date. The two companies have 161 enlisted men present for duty and are under the command of Captain John McLean Hildt. Captain Hildt is the only officer of the regiment present since the recent transfer of Captain Alexander N. Shipley to permanent duty with the Quartermaster Department.

Companies C and E are sent to take possession of nearby Fort Barrancas, one of the two prewar forts occupied by the Confederates and the object of Union bombardments in November 1861 and January 1862. As the companies approach the fort, they notice that the Confederates have left the keys to the magazines and the gates hanging against the outside walls, "as if to invite their successors to walk in and take possession." Captain Hildt immediately suspects a much more dangerous invitation: "The disposition of the keys had too much the appearance of a sinister design; and with a wariness which marks the true soldier when venturing into the enemy's country, they avoided the trap which may have been laid to blow them up, and instead of entering the Fort by the main passage, they scaled the walls." Once inside, the men are put to work excavating the earthen floor of the fort's magazine to ensure the absence of any Confederate 'infernal mechanisms' (mines) intended to destroy the fort and the Federal occupiers. (Regt Return; RR 5:doc 13)

### **May 10, 1862**

The brigade of Regulars pass through Williamsburg, Virginia, enroute to Roper's Church. Williamsburg does not give a lively appearance: "We saw but few citizens, except colored people; the stores were nearly all closed, and the private houses had their blinds closed and were seeminly deserted. The ladies were evidently hiding themselves." In fact, Virginia women are noticeably absent throughout the campaign. Captain John D. Wilkins tells his wife in June that he "has not seen a woman on Virginia soil except about four and they were of that long legged-narrow waisted ones that wouldn't pay for cultivating."

The distance to Roper's Church is not great, but frequent delays occur on account of the small number and narrowness of the roads in the neighborhood and the brigade needs two days to cover the 19 miles to Roper's Church. Hard use and recent rains also wreak havoc with the roads, which were originally touted by General McClellan as passable in all seasons, and several days are spent in camp to allow the condition of the roads to improve. Captain John D. Wilkins, who was probably used to drier marching conditions while stationed in New Mexico, complains about the very bad condition of the Peninsula roads: "In fact, I never saw a 'bad road' until I came here and the mud is as 'tenacious' as the inhabitants." The chief quartermaster for the entire Army readily agrees with this assessment, complaining that he had "never seen worse raods in any part of the country. Teams cannot haul over half a load, and often empty wagons are stalled." (Regt Return; OR I 11(1):24; Wilkins 5/14/62&6/14/62; Meyers 212; Cullen 46)

### **May 12, 1862**

After spending two days at Fort Barrancas, Companies C and E move with most of General Arnold's command to take possession of Pensacola, Florida, the largest city on the Florida panhandle. The march from Fort Barrancas is uneventful, except that two shots are fired at the advance guard as it enters the city from a couple of Confederate vedettes. The troops form a square in the center of the City's plaza to witness the raising of the national colors. The cheers of the soldiers are joined by a few from the inhabitants. (OR I 6:659)

### **May 13, 1862**

Having left Roper's Church on the Virginia Peninsula at 5:00 a.m., the brigade of Regular infantry continues westward on the main Peninsula road. During today's march, the soldiers are given a reprieve from the frequent rains that turned the roads to a mud that threatened to capture a man's boots. Of course, they now learn what happens to a dry road when thousands of soldiers use it at once. The regiment must wade through clouds of choking dust. The same weather that dried the roads also makes the march "excessively hot."

In a desperate attempt to reduce the weight in their knapsacks, the tired soldiers, including the Regulars, abandon a veritable treasure trove of clothing and equipment along the road for the local inhabitants. The soldiers are very generous and the road is soon strewn with blankets, overcoats, and other clothing and articles. To one soldier these scenes of castaway equipment looked "as if after plowing the roads with heavy teams, [the overloaded soldiers] were sowing them for a harvest." One of the Regulars explained the rationale by which the soldiers decided to lighten their loads: "We reasoned that there was a long summer before us, during which we would need but little clothing in this climate; and if we were still alive in the fall we could draw more blankets and overcoats." The officers are more fortunate as a wagon is provided to carry their tents and mess kits. Some of the officers also acquired 'contrabands' at Fort Monroe, who act as servants and carry a portion of their master's personal equipment.

Throughout the marches up the Peninsula, strict orders exist against foraging or destroying private property, even though it is obvious that the private property protected belongs to secessionists serving in the Confederate Army. Brigadier General George Sykes, who is himself a native of a slave state, goes so far as to prohibit his troops from taking fence rails for firewood. The orders are eventually relaxed after the Confederate invasion of Maryland in September 1862.

Long after dark, the Regular troops finally reach Cumberland on the Pamunkey River. The Third Infantry encamps on a bluff overlooking the river and several other Union camps. "Thousands upon thousands of camp fires were seen as far as the eye could reach in every direction." It is a most beautiful view, but even in camp there is no escaping the clouds of dust "that literally fill the atmosphere and every open receptacle-hence one's eyes, ears, nose, mouth, etc. are filled constantly.

Upon reaching Cumberland, General George Sykes, commander of the heretofore independent Regular brigade, is instructed to report to Brigadier General Fitz John Porter of the Third Corps. By May 15th, most of the Army of the Potomac is located near this temporary depot. Army headquarters with Porter's division of the Third Corps, Smith's division of the Fourth Corps, and Franklin's division of the First Corps are at Cumberland. The two other divisions of the Fourth Corps are a few miles south at New Kent Court House. The Second Corps is situated down river at Eltham Landing, site of a failed attempt to outflank the retreating Confederates on May 7th. After withstanding two more days of rain, the brigade of Regular infantry advances another seven miles on May 17th to the vicinity of White House, about 25 miles from Richmond at the terminus of the railroad. (Regt Return; OR I 11(1):24, (3):168; Wilkins 5/14/62; Meyers 211-212, 216; B&L 2:191)

## **May 18, 1862**

While the Army of the Potomac is encamped near White House, Major General George McClellan creates two provisional Army Corps by rearranging the existing Corps structure. He originally asked permission to change the organization of the Army in the aftermath of the Battle of Williamsburg, charging that the current Corps commanders showed their incompetence and declaring that had he been "one-half hour later on the field on the 5th we would have been routed and would have lost everything." Although the request is considered in some quarters as "merely an effort to pamper one or two pets and to persecute and degrade their supposed rivals", the President authorizes the temporary suspension of the existing organization in favor of any that General McClellan sees fit to adopt.

The resulting provisional organization is announced to the Army in General Order No. 125, Headquarters Army of the Potomac. Taking one division from each of the existing Third and Fourth Corps and the only division of the First Corps actually with the Army, General McClellan establishes the Fifth Corps under Brigadier General Fitz John Porter and the Sixth Corps under Brigadier General William Franklin. Porter's Division becomes the First Division of the Fifth Corps, and command is given to Brigadier General George W. Morell. To fill out the strength of Porter's Corps, the brigade of Regular Infantry under Brigadier General George Sykes is reorganized as the Second Division of the Fifth Corps. The provisional designation is finally removed on July 22nd when the War Department confirms the permanent establishment of the two Corps.

General Sykes becomes the commander of the new Second Division and his original command is divided into two brigades of Regular infantry. The Third Infantry is placed in the First Brigade together with the 4th, 12th, and 14th Infantries. The Second Brigade consists of the 2nd, 6th, 10th, 11th, and 17th Infantries. Because of the small number of Regulars, a brigade of volunteer troops is attached to the division as the Third Brigade. Originally consisting of the 5th New York and the 1st Connecticut Heavy Artillery (serving as infantry), the Connecticut regiment is replaced by the 10th New York on June 7th. One of the officers of the Third Infantry paid these volunteers the ultimate compliment by calling them "almost Regulars." (OR I 11(3):153, 155, 181, 333; Powell 44-45; Parker manuscript)

Lieutenant Colonel Robert Christie Buchanan of the Fourth Infantry is selected to command the First Brigade. A native of Maryland and appointed to the United States Military Academy in 1826 from the District of Columbia, Colonel Buchanan's 32 years of active service have been with the Fourth Infantry. Twice brevetted for gallantry during the Mexican War, he served many years in California and Oregon before coming east with his regiment in November 1861. A biographical sketch accompanying the military record of Colonel Buchanan states that "though a rigid disciplinarian, he was always kind and considerate to subordinates; just and incorruptible in all his dealings; dignified and courtly in his demeanor; gallant and chivalrous on the battlefield; and ever a worthy and noble exemplar to his profession." One of his postwar adjutants paid him this honor: "I do not know any officer of the army whose personal and official integrity, whose impartial discharge of the very delicate and highly responsible duties of his post, stands higher than Robert C. Buchanan." (Cullum 2:617)

Less complementary are the remembrances of another officer who served under Colonel Buchanan. Then Brevet Second Lieutenant and eventual Union Major General George Crook served under Colonel Buchanan in 1853 in California and described his commander as a thoughtless martinet who "believed in that mode of discipline which consisted in trying to break down men's self respect and make a mere machine of them instead of appealing to their better feelings and judgment." Lieutenant Crook also acted as an adjutant to Colonel Buchanan and felt he soon became familiar with his idiosyncrasies: "Our commander seemed particularly

elated at his own importance, and his fitness for the duties assigned him, and lost no opportunity to impress on all of us subordinates how far we fell short of what he expected. He seemed to take delight in wounding the feelings of those under him, and succeeded pretty generally in making himself unpopular amongst the citizens as well as the army. Colonel Buchanan's principle was to allow no subordinate to make suggestions unasked, and told me, on one occasion, never to take the suggestions of a non-commissioned officer but go ahead and do my own way, even if I knew I was wrong. It was clear he must have followed this principle, judging from the number of mistakes he made." (Crook 9-10)

Command of the Second Brigade is entrusted to Major William Chapman of the Second Infantry. A graduate of the United States Military Academy in 1831, Major Chapman also received two brevets (major and lieutenant colonel) for gallantry during the Mexican War. After 30 years in the Fifth Infantry, he was notified of his promotion to major of the Second Infantry in February 1861 while in command of the vital western supply depot of Fort Union, New Mexico. He joined his new regiment in Washington City in January 1862 and led the regiment to the Peninsula. He will shortly be notified of a further promotion to Lieutenant Colonel of the Third Infantry, to date from February 20th. One of the enlisted men of his command remembered then Major Chapman as "a good disciplinarian and an excellent drill master" who never made an error in executing General Sykes' command during brigade drills. Well along in years and repeatedly sick during the upcoming campaign, he will frequently relinquish command of the brigade to Major Charles S. Lovell of the Tenth Infantry. (Cullum 2:643; Meyers 185)

### **May 20, 1862**

The advance elements of the Army of the Potomac reach the ruins of the Bottoms Bridge and the railroad bridge over the Chickahominy River only eight miles from Richmond. The Fifth Corps is located approximately seven miles to the rear of the advance at Tunstall's Station on the Richmond and York River Railroad. According to the annual report of the movements of the Third Infantry for May 1862, the regiment remains at Tunstall's Station until May 22nd, when it takes up the march for Cold Harbor.

While on the march, the Third Infantry uses a source of bad water and nearly all of the officers and some of the men are stricken with diarrhea. Captain John D. Wilkins of Company F, one of the afflicted, writes his wife that he is being treated with a mixture of camphor and opium "and it appears to have quieted matters somewhat." Having now spent two months in the Peninsula, Captain Wilkins concludes that "I don't like this portion of Virginia at all with its bugs, ticks, snakes, and varmints of all sizes and ages. Its awfully hot and humid also." He is optimistic, however, that the Army of the Potomac will soon successfully conclude the campaign: "I would not be surprised to be ordered to fall in, and finish this letter in Richmond." (Regt Return; OR I 11(1):25; Wilkins 5/22/62)

### **May 25, 1862**

Companies C and E of the Third Infantry under the command of Captain John McLean Hildt leave Pensacola, Florida, aboard the steam transport Philadelphia to join the regiment in the Virginia Peninsula. The Philadelphia delivered 110 bullocks and 80 sheep to the Union troops in Florida on May 13th. It is hoped that the ship had an opportunity to air out before the return passengers embarked. After a stop at Key West on May 30th, the vessel will arrive in New York City on June 5th. The men enjoy fine weather the entire passage home. (Regt Return; NYTimes 6/5/62 5:4)

### **May 26, 1862**

The Second Division of the Fifth Corps changes location from Cold Harbor to a new camp near the mill pond of Gaines' Mill on Powhite Creek. The new camp is less than two miles above the New Bridge over the Chickahominy River. Captain John D. Wilkins of Company F points out in a letter to his wife that the camp is also only four miles from the enemy. Named Camp Lovell in honor of the commander of the Tenth Infantry, Captain Wilkins calls it "our final camp, where we leave our baggage and traps, and Secesh has either to fight or skedaddle."

The mill pond serves as the water source for Camp Lovell, but soldiers also use it for bathing and washing clothes. Needless to say, the health of officers and men does not improve after the change in location. Diarrhea remains the most common complaint, but cases of typhus fever and bilious disorders are also reported. Captain Thomas Walker of Company I and Second Lieutenant Issac Helm of Company G are listed as sick on the regimental return for May. Captain Walker will be able to remain with the regiment, but Lieutenant Helm is sent north with a sick leave of absence in June. In Special Order No. 147 of the War Department, dated July 1, his leave is extended 30 days. Lieutenant Helm will rejoin the regiment at Harrison's Landing on July 22d. Musician Woollard of Company G unfortunately dies of disease at Camp Lovell on June 11th. In an effort to combat sickness, General McClellan authorizes the issuance of a half a gill of whiskey each morning to every officer and soldier of the Army.

Camp Lovell is situated on the plantation of a Doctor Gaines, who is present and extremely vocal in support of the Southern Confederacy. His home is described by an observer as one of the finest plantation houses in the area, both in its exterior and interior decorations. The home is surrounded by the camps of the First Division of the Fifth Corps and an armed guard provided by General Sykes protects the Doctor's property from vandalism. The headquarters of the Army of the Potomac are also located nearby and General McClellan informs the President that the Army "is quietly closing in upon the enemy preparatory to the last struggle." Two Corps are across the Chickahominy within six miles of Richmond. The other three remain on the north bank covering river crossings as far north as Mechanicsville. The Regulars are put to work building approaches across the Chickahominy swamps to the new bridges being constructed to link the Army. (OR I 11(1):32&33; Regt Return; Wilkins 5/26/62&6/6/62; Meyers 218-219; NYTimes 6/7/62 1:4; Wheeler 222)

### **May 27, 1862**

Brigadier General Fitz John Porter's Fifth Corps is involved in its first fighting of the Peninsula campaign when it attacks a Confederate brigade encamped near Hanover Court House north of Richmond. Only the First Division of the Fifth Corps participates in the fight, the Second Division under General George Sykes remaining at Camp Lovell. Because Confederate troops are thought to be still in the area after the battle, Major General George McClellan orders General Sykes' division of Regular troops on May 28th to move toward Hanover Court House to be in position to support General Porter. After marching 12 miles and encamping about 3 miles from the town on May 28th, the division returns to Camp Lovell on the evening of May 29th. The officers of Third Infantry are unaware of the reasons for the marching and countermarching and presume that General McClellan is selecting his route to enter Richmond. (Regt Return; OR I 11(1):35, 683; Wilkins 6/1/62)

### **May 31, 1862\_Battle of Seven Pines/Fair Oaks**

The Confederates seize the initiative in the Peninsula campaign by attacking the divided Union Army in an attempt to destroy the two Union Army Corps on the south side of the Chickahominy River. The Union lines hold in large part because of the rapid reinforcement of the beleaguered defenders by troops of the Second Corps, who cross the rain-swollen river on bridges threatening to collapse in the flood. Two days of desultory warfare results, during which the Confederate commander General Joseph Johnston is severely wounded. The attack

convinces Union General George McClellan that he must be fearfully outnumbered since he is unable to believe that the Confederate commander would risk an attack against superior odds.

The Fifth Corps, situated on the north side of the Chickahominy River, is initially held in reserve during the battle. Expecting to be shortly sent into the fray, Captain John D. Wilkins of Company F of the Third Infantry writes his wife a short message which he hopes is not his last: "We leave this place in a few moments and what work is before us no one can tell. I feel all right and our command is in fine spirits and I expect will give a good account of themselves." He recently received photographs of his daughters Ella and Carrie and he tells his wife to "tell the children I not only sleep with them, kiss them, and brag over them, but I carry them in the pocket nearest my heart wherever I go."

At dawn on June 1st, the two divisions of the Fifth Corps move to reinforce the troops on the south side of the river. They are unable to proceed further than Doctor Gaine's house, however, because recent rains have so swelled the river and swamps that the approaches to the bridges are under water. While repairs are hurriedly completed, the men lay upon their arms awaiting the order to cross. They are able to amuse themselves during the delay by watching the ascent of Professor Lowe in his observation ballon, as the ballon camp is located in a wheat field in front of Doctor Gaine's house. Professor Lowe ascends with a telegraph wire and operator and is able to communicate directly with General McClellan's headquarters. Fortunately, the battle on the other side of the river ends before the divisions are required to risk the river crossing. (Wilkins 6/1/62; NYTimes 6/7/62 1:4)