

150 Years Ago in the Third Infantry

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November 1862

November 1, 1862

The Third Infantry and the rest of Sykes' division of the Fifth Corps leave Pleasant Valley, Maryland, and cross the Potomac River. Their destination is Snickers Gap in the Blue Ridge Mountains, through which Virginia State Route 7 now passes. Sykes' division arrives in the vicinity of Snickers Gap during the evening of November 2 and the early hours of November 3. The division supports a cavalry reconnaissance into the Shenandoah Valley beyond and is intended to prevent the enemy from using the pass to attack the rear of the Army of the Potomac as it advances along the east front of the Blue Ridge. (Regt Return)

November 3, 1862

As the First Brigade of Sykes' division, including the Third Infantry, is being posted on the mountain at Snickers Gap, Captain Thomas Walker of Company I reports to the brigade commander, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Buchanan, that he is sick and receives permission to stay in the rear with the ambulances. General Sykes is present when this exchange takes place. Captain Walker has been listed on the regimental returns of the Third Infantry for each of the months of July through October 1862 as "present sick". He has been suffering from chronic neuralgia (a nerve pain disorder) and rheumatism, and also suffered a sprained ankle recently. Several days later, on the evening before the division withdraws from the gap, Sykes orders the "ambulances down the hill preparatory to the troops moving in the morning." He sees Captain Walker join the ambulances and presumes he is still listed on the sick report. The exchange with Colonel Buchanan and observations of Sykes regarding Captain Walker will prove significant on November 10th. (Regt Return; GCM KK382)

November 5, 1862

Notwithstanding the fact that the Army of the Potomac is on the march, President Lincoln orders General McClellan to be relieved from command and replaced with General Ambrose Burnside.

November 6, 1862

Sykes's division withdraws from Snickers Gap. The First Brigade of the division forms the main body of the rear guard. According to General Robert Buchanan, "an attack by the enemy as we retired was by many expected", but does not occur. (Regt return; GCM KK382)

November 10, 1862

General McClellan takes leave of his army following a final grand review. For the history of the Third Infantry, however, the departure of General McClellan serves as the backdrop for an incident involving Captain Thomas Walker of Company I. At about 10:30 a.m., Lieutenant Frederick Devoe, who is regimental adjutant, brings a pass to First Brigade headquarters to secure the permission of the brigade commander, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Buchanan, for Captain Thomas Walker, First Lieutenant Jacob Ford Kent, and Lieutenant Devoe to visit nearby Warrenton and return to camp the same day. The pass has been approved by Captain John Wilkins as commander of the Third Infantry, but also needs the approval of Colonel Buchanan. Recalling that Captain Walker was on the sick report when the brigade was deployed at Snickers Gap last week, Colonel Buchanan asks

Lieutenant Devoe whether Captain Walker is still on the sick report. When Lieutenant Devoe replies that he believes Captain Walker remains on the sick report, Colonel Buchanan refuses to approve the pass with respect to Captain Walker, explaining that "I cannot sign the permission for him to be absent as it might interfere with the Doctor's treatment." Colonel Buchanan takes his knife and cuts the name of Captain Walker out of the pass and then signs it for the other two officers to go to Warrenton. Lieutenant Devoe returns to the regimental camp and shows the altered pass to Captain Walker. Doctor Henry M. Hall, acting assistant surgeon of the regiment, would have to sign a new pass for Captain Walker, and the Captain would then have to seek Colonel Buchanan's approval.

When Lieutenant Devoe returns from Warrenton between 3:30 and 4 p.m., a rumor is prevalent within the Regular camps that General McClellan will be at Sykes' headquarters "to see such officers as wished to bid him good bye". However, Captain Sydney Burbank of the 14th Infantry and Captain Francis A. Davies of the 16th Infantry, who previously commanded one of the companies of the Third Infantry, arrive in the camp of the regiment with the news that they heard that General McClellan would be at General Fitz John Porter's Fifth Corps headquarters instead of Sykes' headquarters. They ask the officers of the Third Infantry if any of them were going to bid the General farewell. Captain Walker goes to the tent of Captain Wilkins and asks him to join the group leaving to see General McClellan. Interestingly, Captain Wilkins, who was in the same graduating class at the Military Academy as General McClellan and conversed pleasantly with the General on numerous occasions during the Peninsula and at Sharpsburg, declines the invitation.

About dark, a group of officers, which includes Captain Walker, are observed on horseback passing Colonel Buchanan's quarters. First Lieutenant Steven Van Rensselaer of the Twelfth Infantry, aide-de-camp for Colonel Buchanan, recognizes Captain Walker among the group of officers and remarks to his commander that "Do you see Captain Walker? He seems to be very tight." Given Captain Walker's condition, Colonel Buchanan suspects that Captain Walker may have left camp despite the disapproval of his pass that morning. The group of officers proceeds to Sykes' headquarters to find out whether General McClellan is there. Sykes explains what happened next: "About dusk an officer rode between my tent and that of my Adj. Genl. He appeared to have lost his way - he dismounted from his horse within a few feet of me, and in so doing he fell on his back on the ground. I was surprised and ascertaining who it was found it to be Captain Walker 3d Infy - who was helplessly drunk. To save him any further mortification, I sent him with an aide-de-camp to his quarters and requested his Brigade commander to place him in arrest." The aide-de-camp, Lieutenant James Snyder, on detached service from the Third Infantry, helps Captain Walker remount his horse "with very great difficulty" and returns him to Colonel Buchanan. Colonel Buchanan observes that Captain Walker is "decidedly intoxicated", and Lieutenant Van Rensselaer cites as evidence Captain Walker "staggering and almost falling into the fire when leaving Col. Buchanan's quarters."

Two charges are brought against Captain Walker. The first charge is for "Disobedience of Orders" in that Captain Walker "having been refused permission to leave the Camp of his Regiment by his Brigade Commander did nevertheless leave his camp." However, at the resulting General Court Martial held on November 15th, no evidence is presented that Captain Walker went to Warrenton with the two officers listed on the pass. Lieutenant Devoe is the only officer of the Third Infantry called as a witness by the prosecution. He is asked whether Captain Walker "absented himself from camp after being shown the pass", and Lieutenant Devoe answers "I do not know". Captain Wilkins appears as a witness for the defense and testifies that, given his conversation with Captain Walker about joining a group to see General McClellan, Captain Walker probably presumed he had permission to go with the officers attempting to find General McClellan. No Brigade order is presented to

the court that prohibits officers from moving about the camps of Sykes' division. The court finds Captain Walker not guilty of the first charge.

The second charge, "Conduct Prejudicial to Good Order and Military Discipline" has two specifications. The first states that "Walker, having been borne on the 'sick report' of his Regiment from the 2nd to the 10th of Nov. 1862 inclusive – this while the Regiment was in front of, marching towards and in the vicinity of the enemy, did on the date last mentioned leave his camp without authority". This specification seems intended to make Captain Walker, commander of the Third Infantry at the Battle of Gaines Mill and a veteran of subsequent battles, appear as a coward or at least a shirker. Doctor Henry M. Hall, acting assistant surgeon of the regiment, testifies to Captain Walker's chronic ailments affecting his ability to perform daily duties. The court also finds him not guilty of the first specification.

However, the second specification of the second charge asserts that Captain Walker showed himself to Sykes in a state of helpless intoxication. There isn't much of a defense that Captain Walker can mount on his behalf, considering the testimony that he could barely mount his horse. Captain Walker suggests that perhaps he tripped over a tent rope when he dismounted his horse and that even a sober man can occasionally stagger, although Lieutenant Van Rensselaer responds that there is a decided difference between the staggering of a sober and intoxicated man. The court finds captain Walker guilty of the second specification of the second charge and of the charge itself. He is sentenced to be confined to the limits of his Regimental Camp for the period of one month and to be reprimanded in orders by the commanding officer of the Army of the Potomac. (GCM KK382)

November 23, 1862

The Army of the Potomac concentrates north of the Rappahannock River opposite Fredericksburg, Virginia. The Third Infantry and the rest of the Second Division of the Fifth Corps camp at a site referred to in the regimental return and in letters of Captain John Wilkins as Henry House, Virginia, in Stafford County. The regiment will take advantage of its several week stay here by drilling every day. Captain Wilkins reports that the "new levies are improving rapidly". He also expresses displeasure about the "insinuations and lies of those in and out of authority" regarding the quality of the Regular soldiers. Captain Wilkins insists that the Regulars "continue to keep their old prestige". Instead, it is the volunteer troops who are suspect: "I am very much afraid in spite of the 'bolstering' of the press etc. that they will fail in the hour of trial". (Wilkins 11/26/62)

November 23, 1862

On the regimental return for October, First Lieutenant John B. Williams of Company G was listed as "present sick". Apparently Lieutenant Williams has been on the sick report so frequently, that General George Sykes, commanding the Second Division of the Fifth Corps, ordered a Board of Medical Officers convened (Special Order No. 110) to consider the case of Lieutenant Williams and address the suspicion that he is feigning illness to avoid duty. At the Battle of Gaines Mill on June 27th, Lieutenant Williams abandoned his post in command of Company G, claiming he was forced to leave on account of illness. Charged with a violation of the Fifty-Second Article of War, the Court was lenient and found him guilty of the lesser offense of being absent without leave. He received a severe reprimand from Sykes for that offense, and it is safe to assume that Sykes has had concerns about Lieutenant Williams since then, although it appears Williams served honorably at the Second Battle of Bull Run and at Antietam.

The Board of Medical Officers concludes that Lieutenant Williams "is able to go upon such duty as may be required of him". In Special Order No. 112 of the headquarters of Sykes' division, Sykes orders that Lieutenant Williams "will be forthwith returned to duty in his company, and hereafter will not be permitted to go upon the 'Sick Report' until placed there by the decision of the three senior medical officers of this Division." (E1101 RG 391)

November 24, 1862

It takes more than a week for the record of the General Court Martial involving Captain Thomas Walker of Company I to reach the desk of General Ambrose Burnside, commander of the Army of the Potomac. The court originally sentenced Captain Walker to be confined to the limits of his Regimental Camp for the period of one month and to be reprimanded in orders by the commanding officer of the Army of the Potomac, but General Burnside declines to execute the reprimand. He returns the record to the court "with the suggestion to amend the sentence so as that the reprimand may be administered by the reviewing officer, as is more usual". The court reconvenes on November 28th and substitutes the commander of the Fifth Corps, now General Daniel Butterfield, for General Burnside. The reprimand is issued on December 4th in General Order No. 4 of the Headquarters of the Fifth Corps. In the order, General Butterfield issues the following reprimand: "The commanding general regrets that it is his duty to reprimand an officer whose position and experience should have made it impossible for him to have committed an act so prejudicial to discipline and good order, so mortifying not alone to himself but to his associates and companions in the service." (GCM KK382)

November 25, 1862

Captain John Wilkins visits the Headquarters of the Army of the Potomac opposite Fredericksburg, Virginia. He doesn't see its new commander, General Ambrose Burnside, but learns from other officers that the reason the Army hasn't crossed the Rappahannock River yet to engage the Confederates digging in on the other side is "some deficiencies in the pontoon train". Captain Wilkins observes that "there is always something wrong", and the visit to headquarters was not encouraging.

Captain Wilkins expresses his opinion that if General McClellan had not been relieved and the Army "had pushed on, instead of halting at Warrenton, we would have had Fredericksburg without any loss of life". He is not alone in this opinion: "Now it is the opinion of all that it cannot be taken without great loss on our side and a possibility of our being obliged to advance another time on Washington". Captain Wilkins recommends that under the circumstances the best thing to do is "to take another march up the Rappahannock and draw the enemy into a fair fight on an open field if it is possible." It is indeed unfortunate he didn't get a chance to see General Burnside. (Wilkins 11/26/62)

November 26, 1862

In several letters to his wife, Captain John Wilkins has complained about the soft life enjoyed by general officers while line officers like himself suffer. He repeats this theme in a letter written at the camp of the Third Infantry near Fredericksburg: "I am getting tired and used up traveling through Old Virginnny making other people generals and colonels who no sooner get the appointment than they seek a soft place in Pennsylvania or New York." For the first time, Captain Wilkins also directly criticizes his division commander and former comrade in the Third Infantry, General George Sykes. According to Captain Wilkins, Sykes "is beginning to have political aspirations, and is as big a volunteer general as any of them." Apparently, Sykes no longer thinks the two brigades of Regular infantry are as disciplined and well trained as when he was in immediate command of them. Captain Wilkins complains that Sykes "abuses the Regulars on all occasions insinuating that the discipline of the service all departed." He concludes with an observation that his wife will

apparently understand: "He is the same Sykes that was in New Mexico." Captain Wilkins is being prescient as in just three days he and staff officers of Sykes will have a major altercation. (Wilkins 11/26/62)

November 26, 1862

Second Lieutenant John Whitney assumes command of Company K. (Regt return)

November 29, 1862

A routine picket duty assignment for the Third Infantry goes horribly awry for Captain John Wilkins, commanding the regiment. At about 4 p.m., First Lieutenant Heyward Cutting of the Tenth Infantry, acting assistant adjutant general on Sykes' staff, receives verbal orders from General Daniel Butterfield, commander of the Fifth Corps, with reference to pickets for the night. Lieutenant Cutting delivers the orders to the commanders of the First and Second Brigades of Sykes' division. Major Andrews of the Second Brigade details the Sixth and Seventh Infantries for picket duty and Colonel Robert Buchanan of the First Brigade details Captain Wilkins's Third Infantry. Lieutenant Cutting then rides over to the camp of the Third Infantry, where he finds Captain Wilkins in the act of mounting his horse, and asks him who of the three regimental commanders is the highest-ranking officer and will command the detachment. Captain Wilkins replies that Captain Henry Maynadier is senior officer.

Lieutenant Cutting rides over to where Captain Maynadier is standing, but learns that Captain Maynadier is not accompanying the detachment and Captain Wilkins will command the picket detail. Just then Captain Wilkins rides up at the head of the Third Infantry. Lieutenant Cutting tells Captain Maynadier and First Lieutenant Steven Van Rensselaer of the Twelfth Infantry, aide-de-camp for Colonel Buchanan, that from his brief exchange and observation of Captain Wilkins, he "thought Captain Wilkins was too much intoxicated to receive the orders which I had to turn over, these orders being of a complicated nature". Captain Maynadier makes no response, but Lieutenant Van Rensselaer says that if Lieutenant Cutting would "state officially to him that Captain Wilkins was too drunk to receive orders, he would report Captain Wilkins to Colonel Buchanan." He does so, and Lieutenant Rensselaer rides off to his boss, returning a few moments later to place Captain Wilkins in arrest. Captain Wilkins turns the Third Infantry over to First Lieutenant Dangerfield Parker, saying "Parker take command, I am in arrest", and returns to his tent. Captain Wilkins immediately writes a note directly to Colonel Buchanan to "respectfully request" information regarding the limits of his arrest and a copy of the charges and specifications preferred against him". (GCM KK412)