

PERSONAL NARRATIVES
OF EVENTS IN THE
WAR OF THE REBELLION,

BEING PAPERS READ BEFORE THE

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INCIDENTS OF SERVICE
WITH THE
ELEVENTH REGIMENT
RHODE ISLAND VOLUNTEERS,

BY

CHARLES H. PARKHURST.



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THE NINE MONTHS' MEN

[Read before the Society, February 11, 1880.]



THE unexpected and untoward results of General McClellan's march upon Richmond by the peninsular route in 1862, while sadly discouraging to those who had looked upon the young general as the appointed leader who was to conduct our army to triumphant success, yet served to intensify the determination of the loyal people of the country, to strengthen in every possible way, the hand of the government in the impending contest.

Probably no single act of President Lincoln during the early years of the war, met with such universal acceptance as his appointment of McClellan as general in chief. His youth, his marked success in

northern and western Virginia, at once gave to him the prestige of success. Even criticism, so rife in later days, was silent. His plans for re-organizing the army and placing it on a new footing, were accepted by the country, even before they were known, and when impatient loyalty clamored for a forward movement, his delays were attributed to the wise foresight and precaution of the skillful soldier, to whom were now freely attributed all the virtues and wisdom of the great captains of former times, and when, after weeks of incessant toil and struggle, the peninsular campaign was ended by the withdrawal of the army from before Richmond, the vast majority of the north were loud in their commendations of his brilliant strategy in the conduct of his so-called masterly retreat. He still to an unexampled degree commanded the admiration and retained the fullest confidence of his defeated, but unconquered troops.

Just at this juncture of affairs, a new candidate for military glory came prominently to the front in the person of General John Pope, who had recently been assigned to the command of the army of Virginia. His orders on assuming command were universally

construed as an open criticism upon General McClellan's methods, and hence General Pope was at once and almost by common consent gazetted for failure by the army of the Potomac, and in fact by every one. Defeat under General Pope was already a foregone conclusion. General Pope informed his army in his opening address, that he had come from the west, where they had always seen the backs of their enemies ; from an army which sought the enemy, and whose policy was attack and not defense. He established headquarters in the saddle and wished soldiers to forget such phrases as taking and holding strong positions ; lines of retreat ; bases of supplies ; that his army was to study the probable lines of retreat of the enemy and allow their own to take care of themselves ; to look forward and not behind, etc. With such proclamations and under such a leader, the army of Virginia commenced its campaign, which in a few short weeks culminated in the second Bull Run and the battle of Chantilly. General Pope was relieved of his command to the general acceptance of the country, and he followed the advice of Horace Greeley and went west.

Thus opened the month of September, 1862. The conviction that there had come an eventful crisis in affairs was wide spread. Our two great armies in Virginia had been most disastrously repulsed, and the confederate forces had at least, been partially successful, and the outlook was by no means cheering. In July previous, the President had ordered a draft of three hundred thousand men for three years, and in August another draft of the same number of militia for nine months, and but slight response had been made to either of these calls. Our army was no longer before Richmond, but was defending Washington, and Lee was marching northward.

Suddenly, and almost as by magic, the saddened people were aroused from their despondency, and began again to realize that they had a country that was worth preserving, and for which, in time of need, sacrifices must be made. Men and money without stint were proffered to answer the President's demands. Old regiments were filled and new levies were raised with wonderful rapidity. Our Seventh regiment, which had been slowly recruiting since May, was despatched to the field and in about thirty

days two full regiments of nine months' men were organized and forwarded to Washington.

The composition of these regiments, the Eleventh and Twelfth, and in fact most of the nine months' regiments, was in some respects exceptional. There were many very worthy citizens, who, from various causes were unable, or at least unprepared to enlist for so long a time as three years, but yet felt the strong obligation to do something more than stay at home and encourage others to perform duties which equally rested on them. It may perhaps be conceded that there are degrees of patriotism, and that he who enters the service of the country in time of danger, prepared to remain until the danger has passed, is a more exalted patriot than he who when a call is made for a limited term offers himself in response to that call. But when we remember that after the attack on Fort Sumpter, Secretary Seward announced that ninety days would end the controversy so inauspiciously commenced, and when we remember with what celerity the country responded to the President's call when the first gun was fired at that now historic fort, and how, as in the times of 1776, men

left their ploughs in the fields, their fires burning at their forges to answer the demand of the country, we may safely leave the question of assigning the relative degrees of patriotism to be solved by the metaphysician, rather than enter upon its discussion among those, many of whom saw the beginning and end of the controversy which settled forever, as we believe, that the United States of America was not a confederacy but a nation.

One other thing probably will also be conceded, that hostile bullets made little distinction between three months', nine months' or three years' men, and that the man who left his arm or leg on the field was seldom asked whether his lost member was enlisted for the war or only for a limited and shorter term.

Assuredly when our Seventh and Twelfth regiments shared in the perils of the attack at Fredericksburg, no questions were raised between them as to their respective terms of service. It was sufficient for them to feel that they were all serving a common cause and were striving for the same result.

I have said that the composition of these two nine months' regiments was somewhat exceptional. The

great uprising from the despondency caused by the defeats in Virginia, had developed a firm determination that no draft should take place, but that the ranks should be filled by volunteers. No such enthusiasm had been aroused since the first call of the President. Business was forgotten and the men of affairs devoted themselves and their means to the country's service. Meetings were held daily in the several wards and the academy of music was the general rallying point until the work of filling the quota was completed. The quota under the two calls was, as I remember, seventeen hundred and ninety-one. For the nine months' service, eight hundred and ninety-six were required. In a few days some eighty thousand dollars was subscribed and paid to the enlisted men from Providence in the Eleventh and Twelfth regiments. Bounties were also offered by the state, the city and the towns, and provision was also made for weekly payments by the city to the families or dependents of those who had enlisted, so that the sum received by the nine months' volunteers amounted to something over five hundred dollars for the entire term. Prizes were

also offered to the ward which first filled its quota, and every provision was promised to the families of the volunteers.

Among other organizations whose activity was specially worthy of notice, was the Young Men's Christian Association, who wisely determined that they could in no way more efficiently serve the Great Master, and promote the objects for which they were organized, than to aid in upholding the government in its great trials.

Through their exertions two companies were raised, officered by members of the Association, and these companies were distinctly known as the Christian companies. The Association never forgot its protégés from the day they first entered camp until their term of service was ended. As for the other companies, they were sometimes called pagans simply as a distinguishing name, not, of course, as indicating their theological status or their moral qualities.

The Eleventh regiment was at the outstart, specially fortunate in its commanding officer. Colonel Metcalf had come from the Third regiment, then in South Carolina, where he had done honorable service,

of which, with his characteristic modesty, he has only given us faint outlines in his papers. Some of us knew him before he came to us, and knew what to expect, and it was to the general regret of the regiment that after a few weeks he left us and returned to assume command of his old regiment at Hilton Head.

One of the first duties to which Colonel Metcalf assigned the writer, was that of an inspecting and mustering officer for the regiment. This position was one not recognized in the regulations, but I was acting under an order from the Governor and received my instructions from the Colonel. They were in brief, to pay no sort of respect to any recruiting officer's representations or to any surgeon's certificate, but if I did not in all respects like the appearance of the recruit or did not think he would make in all respects an excellent soldier, he could not be accepted, and the Colonel informed me he should hold me responsible for the strict execution of these instructions. I was permitted to be somewhat autocratic over recruits, and there were, as I happened to know, several dead-beats who did not pass our muster

whom I afterwards saw in the ranks of the Twelfth regiment. Even at this day I recall the features of some of them. One particularly whose name I forbear to mention, whom I had known as a standing witness in liquor cases in ante bellum days. He came from the Narragansett country, and was ready to serve the cause of temperance and take his fees as a witness in a dozen cases a day with great regularity. He would testify to sales of any article of liquor about which the prosecutor saw fit to inquire. He was a prohibitory enthusiast just in proportion to the amount of his fees as a witness. When they lessened his zeal weakened, and his memory failed him frequently on cross examination, so that he could not tell whether the Hoyle Tavern was in Providence or Woonsocket.

When I saw him as a recruit I instinctively came to the conclusion that he would be more of an ornament to the Twelfth regiment than to ours, and so Colonel Browne reaped the benefit of my kindness and this recruit.

Still one other one comes to mind who certainly must have tried the amiability of my friend, Colonel Browne, if he ever had anything to do with him.

His boast on his return was that he hardly did a day's active duty during his term of service. This man's strong hold was inactive duty.

The result of this sifting process certainly did give an excellent personnel to the enlisted men of the regiment, and it is quite likely that had Colonel Metcalf inspected his officers with as much care as the men had to undergo, his mustering officer at least, might also have been turned over to the tender mercies of Colonel Browne, but Colonel Browne was fortunately saved from such a catastrophe and Colonel Metcalf had to submit to it. A considerable number of our line officers at first were without any militia, not to say military experience. The writer had never drilled with a company until after the war begun, and never occupied any other military position than that of a fine member of the Light Infantry, and had no more idea of the manual of arms than one of the first officers of one of our regiments who, it is said, devised a new order in tactics as follows: "By file present arms. On the right commence presenting." Of course we were unskilled, and I always felt a kindly sympathy for one of our officers somewhat

addicted to the use of polysyllabic words, the meaning of which he did not always fully comprehend. He was called upon to make out for the first time, a certificate of disability for discharge for one of his men, and he wished to say that cause of the disability was not known to exist at the time of his enlistment. The certificate he actually signed was, "the causation of the fatality of this soldier was not known to exist before his enlistment."

But despite our want of military knowledge at the outstart, the position to which we were assigned during the first months of our service, afforded us all ample opportunity to learn tactics and the duties of soldiers. I shall never forget my first night on picket within a few days after our arrival in camp near Fort Ethan Allen. Our picket line extended from the Potomac to the road leading towards Leesburg. At midnight I started to make the grand rounds. My quarters were some fifty rods in rear of the picket line. To say that the night was pitchy dark, would in no sense describe the situation. I had heard of the blackness of midnight, but never had I seen such darkness. It was impossible to distin-

guish anything. But an important duty was imposed upon me, at least I was so informed, and so understood. This was the first detail for picket duty from the regiment. But what could be done; I could not see anything. But yet it was my duty to visit the picket line and see something, and so I moved towards the outposts, and I kept moving and moving until the welcome light of day appeared. We did not find our picket line till morning, and did not find an outpost or any other post. The rain was pouring in torrents during our tramp. I awaited with considerable anxiety the appearance of the Lieutenant-Colonel commanding the entire picket line. But when he came I found that he too had succeeded no better than we had. The darkness was simply unpenetrable. Fortunately picket duty at this point was dangerous only in one way,—that you might be shot by your own men. The enemy were many miles from us at the time.

The regiment soon found permanent quarters on Miner's Hill, where for many weeks the daily round of drill, picket and camp duty was our allotted task. We did not annoy the enemy and they did not dis-

turb us. We had become quite proficient in drill, had learned that a considerable part of a soldier's duty was to obey, not criticise orders, and this kind of war did not seem to us such a fearful thing. One night shortly after Colonel Metcalf had left us and we had been surrendered to the tender mercies of Lieutenant-Colonel Pitman, (who, whatever else may be said in his praise, certainly was not spoiled by the excessive admiration of his regiment,) the long roll sounded and off we started in heavy marching order to intercept and capture Stuart's Cavalry.

This was our first long march. Stuart, however, did not see fit to wait for our arrival, but proceeded about his business, leaving us to attend to ours, which was to march back in heavier marching order than we set out. Every one seemed exceedingly desirous to know why our regiment alone carried knapsacks with which to catch Stuart while the other regiments had none. The answer was that the Lieutenant-Colonel so ordered. This was our first attempt to capture cavalry. We had not then learned what infantry men now proudly claim is the chief use of cavalry, that is, to take all the best things not out of their reach, and to supply themselves from in-

fantry with all that the cavalry most desire. It was on this march that one of our infantry made the novel remark, that he should like to see a dead cavalry man. It was indeed a rash remark. The soldier never knew why he made it, but somehow it has passed into history, and when an infantry man now a days is hard pressed, when all other resources fail, like the followers of Mahomet he turns his face to the East and from the depths of his despair, he utters the agonizing cry, "Oh that I might see a dead cavalry man."

General Stuart having no time to wait for us to capture him, we returned to the ordinary tour of camp duties away from the vicinity of the enemy.

Some weeks later we were assigned to the most annoying and unpleasant duty that can be imposed upon a soldier; that of keeping perpetual guard over our convalescent soldiers, whom we were compelled to watch over and keep under as much restraint as if they had been prisoners of war. They looked upon us as their jailers, and they hooted at us and taunted us as home guards not daring to go to the front. The bounty which our men had received was also a sub-

ject of unfavorable comment from those inside the camp who had enlisted in the day of small things in the way of bounties. This duty imposed upon the regiment could have but a demoralizing effect upon it, and it was disagreeable and monotonous to the last degree. At this time a new Colonel came to us in the person of Colonel Rogers. He at once began to attack the authorities at Washington, and faithfully, continually and persistently labored with and belabored the war department to have his regiment sent to the front. It was a question for some time which would win in this contest, the war department or Colonel Rogers. But the department at last came out ahead, as it finally determined that there was no way to get rid of the persistent importunities of the Colonel, unless he was himself confined at the convalescent camp or sent to the front. The latter alternative was accepted. His stay with us was highly agreeable and peaceful, but his voice was for war, and unless current history is much at fault, our friend found when he assumed command of the Second Rhode Island, wars of various kinds already prepared for him. But as was characteristic of him,

he soon brought order out of seeming chaos, and honored his regiment, his state and himself by his gallant deeds.

There were many things in which Colonel Metcalf and Colonel Rogers were decidedly unlike. They had in common, a high sense of honor and no one ever thought of questioning their manliness or bravery. As their deeds have passed into history, it is no breach of the maxim, "nothing but good of the departed," to touch briefly upon some of their personal qualities. Colonel Metcalf, as a rule, commanded without saying anything about it. When Colonel Rogers commanded he couldn't help saying something about it. No one seeing Colonel Metcalf off duty or un-uniformed, would have suspected that he had any command, while the most casual observer looking at Colonel Rogers, even when asleep, would instinctively know that even then the Colonel, at least, thought that he was in the exercise of authority. Colonel Metcalf, though not pleased at the idea of having his regiment doing simply camp and garrison duty, yet was not disposed to create much excitement about it, while Colonel Rogers within

twenty-four hours after taking command, began to belabor the war department for not sending him with his regiment into the thickest of the fight, and there was but one way to remedy the trouble about the location of the regiment, and that was to send Colonel Rogers away to another command, and so we lost our second Colonel, and the war department had a rest.

But the regiment still remained during the winter and early spring months in the muddy surroundings of convalescent camp, performing the monotonous duty of camp guard. Drills were out of the question, as the details for guard called for all the force we could muster. Officers were largely detached on special duty on courts-martial and the like. The writer at one time found himself occupying the anomalous position of member of the court, counsel for the prisoner and the principal witness against him. It is perhaps unnecessary to say that the accused was not acquitted.

There was one thing in which all the line officers were united and in which their unity was never shaken, which was that there was one officer of the

regiment whom they did not desire to have promoted to the coloneley. But a more remarkable statement, and one that seems hardly credible, is that there was not a line officer who sought the position. It was, and is, of course, an open secret among Rhode Island officers, that the then state executive was supposed to have, if not a mind, at least a will, which he called his own, and that will generally was to do with every officer just what that officer didn't wish to have done.

Some people call this quality strength of mind, some firmness, some obstinacy and some pure cussedness. The question is a somewhat perplexing one, but after mature consideration of the subject in its various bearings, I am quite strongly inclined to accept the latter definition as the true one.

We interviewed senators and representatives and politicians at home, but the governor never knew from us what our wishes were, and therefore could not gratify himself by thwarting them. So when Captain Church, of the Seventh, was sent to us from the front, as our new colonel, he met with a warm and welcome reception. He believed that the author-

ities knew as well as he did where his regiment should be placed to do the most good, and, though he was not at all pleased at their then post of duty, I understand that he was informed by the department that they had heard something of his regiment from his immediate predecessor, that applications for a change of its position had better be postponed for a few days, at least, as there were several like applications of Colonel Rogers on hand that had not yet been examined.

Colonel Church was, like his predecessor, a capital commanding officer, greatly respected by all his command, and they were ready and willing to follow where he should lead. Soon after he assumed command the regiment embarked for Suffolk. Now, we thought we were to see something of life at the front, surely. Our voyage from Alexandria to Norfolk we shall long remember. Our transport was the old steamer "Argo," (re-named "Hero,") which some of us may recall as the craft which used to ply between this city and Rocky Point in the primitive days of that now famous shore resort. It seemed to us then as if extra pains had been taken to make our accom-

modations as uncomfortable as possible. There were no sleeping accommodations whatever. Even the floors of the cabins were covered with sheets of boiler-iron, strewn helter skelter, and we revelled in the luxury of being iron-clad when we tried to sleep. The iron-clad fever was then at its height.

Up to the time of our departure from Washington our men had known nothing of the hardships of army life. We had already been provided with excellent quarters, an abundance of satisfactory rations, and, by the kindness of the friends at home, were generously supplied with luxuries. We knew nothing of long, forced marches, scanty supplies and insufficient clothing, and when the order came to leave behind our camp equipage, and the issue of shelter tents took the place of the usual tents, we began to realize that the change was coming. We, however, soon found what our betters had learned before, that one of the hardest enemies with which an army has to contend is its baggage-train; or, as the old Roman captains used to say, its "*impedimenta*." We all know how often the baggage-trains upset the carefully

arranged plans of our generals and was the unavoidable cause of defeat.

At the time of our arrival at Suffolk, that place was besieged by General Longstreet, and our troops were under the command of General J. J. Peck. The town was really a fortification on a large scale. The confederates were greatly desirous to gain possession of this point as the first step towards recovering Norfolk, and with it, the control of the mouth of the James river. There were two railroads between Suffolk and Norfolk, one of which led to Petersburg and the other to Weldon, North Carolina, but so long as Suffolk was in our control these roads were of little service to the confederacy. It was also of great importance to us to keep Longstreet where he was, so that Lee could not have his forces in the coming contest with Hooker. Longstreet was kept south of Suffolk until the day after the battle of Chancellorsville, when he withdrew from the siege which had lasted some thirty days. If Lee had been fortunate enough to have had General Longstreet with his nearly forty thousand troops at Chancellorsville, the result of that battle might have been even more disastrous to the Union cause.

There the regiment found by actual experience what was meant by the term "march," for we pursued under General Corcoran the confederate troops to the Black Water, making one hundred and twenty-five miles in five days. We were generally in line at three o'clock in the morning, then standing until nine or ten, moving during the hottest part of the day, all, as we understood, to discipline us in marching under the most unfavorable circumstances.

Our next post of duty was to join in the feint on Richmond by way of the peninsula, and we occupied Yorktown and for a few weeks garrisoned the forts at Williamsburg, until our term of service was ended.

But I have wandered from the purpose of this paper, which was to try, in a very general way, to indicate the true position occupied by the nine months' men in the war.

They were in one sense emergency men, and in another sense they were really the reserve of the great armies.

That there was an emergency, and a great and critical emergency, in the affairs of the country at

the close of the summer of 1862, hardly needs assertion. It goes without saying. The defeated but still unconquered Army of the Potomac had lost immensely in men and material, and, more than all, it had lost its prestige, and nothing tangible or visible in the way of success had been accomplished. The credit of the country had been strained, as it seemed, to its utmost capacity. General McClellan was losing the marvellous confidence the country had reposed in him. Lee, flushed with apparent success, was moving northward and threatening our capital and its northern and western connections.

It became a vital question whether timely enlistments could be made for three years so as to recruit the shattered regiments in the field to meet Lee's advancing columns and still provide for the safety of Washington; a matter of paramount political and military necessity. Under these circumstances time was of equal value with money. These nine months' volunteers could as well man the defences of Washington, until they were fitted for service in the field, as those who had undergone the active campaigns of the peninsula and elsewhere, and who were still in

the field. The one great demand was to strengthen the two armies in Virginia, now practically united again as the Army of the Potomac, never, in all time, to be known by any other name, and not only prevent Lee from marching northward, but drive him back again within the defences of Richmond.

No force could do this so well or so effectively as that army which for so many months had been arrayed against him. And it seemed, at that time, that a sufficient number of men to serve for the war, could not be put into the field rapidly enough to fill up the depleted regiments.

At this late day, with the advantage of full knowledge of the results, it hardly seems to be a matter of dispute, that the government acted with great wisdom in calling for these new levies for this limited time, rather than incur the risk of failing to recruit a sufficient number of men for three years, in season to answer the emergency.

It has been sometimes said, even by soldiers, that the nine months' men were mere mercenaries who volunteered under the stimulus of excessive bounties, and that they were not actuated by honorable

or patriotic motives. It is undoubtedly true that there was, for a time, a wide-spread feeling among the old regiments who had enlisted at the opening of the war, when bounties were nominal, that the new levies had been more generously treated than the old ones; and it is equally true that for the moment the veterans looked with jealousy upon the new comers with their well-filled pockets. But this feeling was short-lived, and when, as later, they fought side by side, and each strove to win the victories they all so much desired, the former jealousy, unkindness, or by whatever name it may be called, vanished forever, and their only thought was that they were all striving for a common cause and for their common country.

Speaking with some little knowledge of the men who served in the Eleventh and Twelfth regiments, and with the men in other regiments with whom I was brought in contact, I feel warranted in saying, without fear of contradiction, that no state sent into the service during the war, any better regiments in everything that goes to make a good regiment, than these two nine months' regiments;

and I do not hesitate to say here and everywhere, that in the character of the enlisted men, in the fidelity with which they performed every duty, disagreeable as well as agreeable, and in their general personnel, these two regiments had no superiors.

It is quite true that one of these regiments was in no great engagement and carries on its colors no historic battle names. Yet it is to be remembered that it had not itself the ordering of its own destiny. It went where it was ordered to go and performed the duty to which it was assigned, and left no stain to sully the fair fame and honor of the state or country. It is not every soldier to whom is accorded the honor of bearing the colors. It is not every regiment that turns the tide of battle and wins the victory. Yet those who, in the contest of arms, in whatever station placed, faithfully performed their assigned duties, however lowly they might seem to be, are not to be despised because they were not given the opportunity to do the valiant deeds for which others, differently situated, have secured justly merited honor.

NOTE.

The regimental records show that the entire number of enlisted men discharged for all causes, was forty-eight. Nine men deserted and there were eight deaths, making the entire number of casualties, from all causes, during nine months, sixty-five.

