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20th New York State Militia: The Ulster Guard

The 20th New York State Militia, one of the oldest units in the state, quickly became concerned with the conflict flaring up around the country. During the winter of 1861, months before the attack on Fort Sumter, fourteen New York State Militia officers held a meeting to



Monument of the Ulster Guard at Gettysburg
 Photo: <http://dmna.ny.gov/historic/reghist/civil/infantry/80thInf/80thInfMonument.htm>

determine the course of action of the 20th if hostilities should commence.¹ Colonel George Pratt, commander of the 20th Militia since August 8th 1857, believed war was inevitable. He would soon be proved correct as the attack and eventual surrender of Fort Sumter sent volunteers in waves to the ranks of the 20th New York State Militia—the Ulster Guard. The attack on Fort Sumter sent the country into a frenzy of devotion and patriotic zeal. Towns and counties sent their eager sons into the courageous battle for a divided country. Many of these soldiers were untrained and naïve to hardships that would

come. These men of the 20th signed up for three months, which most Americans thought to be sufficient enough to finish the war.² Throughout this three month period, the 20th New York Militia did not see fighting; however, this pre-war militia unit would form the nucleus of a regiment that represented the ideas of bravery and unity. At the end of this three month stint most

¹ Seward R. Osborne, *The Three-Month Service of the 20th New York State Militia April 28-August 2, 1861*, (Hightstown: Longstreet House, 1998), 3.

² *Ibid*, iii.

of the soldiers demanded a return to the battlefield which is portrayed in a sign that was posted at headquarters which read, “we go not back on our friends, but forward on our enemies.”³

The militia was soon reorganized at Kingston as an official regiment of volunteers becoming the 80th New York Volunteers in September of 1861. Witnessed through the soldiers’ descriptions of the regiment, the men of the 20th refused to accept the state designation due to their active services before the war. Throughout the war they were predominantly known as the 20th New York Militia or simply the Ulster Guard, an identity that stayed with the men despite consolidations as well as re-musters⁴. Enos Vail, a private with the Ulster Guard, expressed this protective watch over the unit’s identity when smaller regiments were added, “I feared that the Twentieth would lose its identity; but we were not disturbed.”⁵ Many men had become attached to the legacy that came to surround the name. The Ulster Guard left for Washington on October 26, 1861, and were mustered out of service on January 29, 1866. The group’s heaviest losses came at the Second Battle of Bull Run (279), Antietam (54) and Gettysburg (170). The men were also assigned Provost Duty and ordered for peacekeeping action in the south, however they still engaged in a healthy amount of fighting throughout.⁶

The 20th was led by Colonel George Pratt, a man whose dedication, competence and personal example was an immeasurable benefit to the military education of the group.⁷ Although his tenure as Colonel was cut unexpectedly short, Pratt had an intense love and sense of duty to the 20th New York. Born in Prattsville, Green County, New York on April 18, 1830, he was the son of a wealthy self-made industrialist. On February 19, 1852, Pratt became Colonel of the 28th

³ Ibid, 15.

⁴ Ibid, 15.

⁵ Enos B. Vail, *Reminiscences of A Boy in the Civil War*, (New York: Forgotten Books, 2012), 111.

⁶ New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center, “80th Infantry Regiment: Civil War”, Accessed November 24, 2012. <http://dmna.ny.gov/historic/reghist/civil/infantry/80thInf/80thInfMain.htm>.

⁷ Seward R. Osborne, *The Three-Month Service of the 20th New York State Militia April 28-August 2, 1861*, (Hightstown: Longstreet House, 1998), iii.

New York Militia as well as a successful businessman in the tanning industry. It is during this 5 year tenure where Pratt enhanced his military knowledge and became acquainted with leadership. On August 8, 1857, Pratt succeeded Gideon Bushnell as Colonel of the 20th Regiment. Providing example of his energetic spirit, Pratt was also a founder of the New York State Military Association and took a very active part in it. It is Pratt who gave the 20th the nickname the Ulster Guard as well as its motto “This Hand for Our Country”. When the time came, Pratt diligently made the 20th a disciplined regiment and cared for his soldiers like they were family.

Longstanding members of the 20th Militia were still able to wear their 1858 uniforms; however, Colonel Pratt had to fight for bank loans in order to get new recruits proper uniforms and maintain a presentable regiment.⁸ Even Colonel Gates wrote in his diary that

Pratt was always busy getting clothing, purchasing supplies and ensuring the regiment was prepared.⁹

Pratt was a very pious man which is clearly evident on May 12, 1861 when he outlawed profanity use. Coarse language floated around camp frequently and this sort of behavior upset the Colonel, a devout Christian his entire life. Colonel Pratt exclaimed to his troops that, “Profanity in any man is among the worst of vices; in the soldier who is subject to especial



Colonel George W. Pratt
Photo: <http://www.old-picture.com/civil-war/Infantry-Colonel-Pratt-George.htm>

⁸ Ibid, 9.

⁹ Theodore B. Gates, *The Civil War Diaries of Colonel Theodore B. Gates, 20th New York State Militia*, (Highstown NJ: Longstreet House Publishing, 1991), 25.

hazard, it is casting away the help of the only arm which give victory.”¹⁰ This is a very unusual order for any Colonel to issue making it a testament to the uniqueness of Colonel Pratt.

After long battles, skirmishes, cold nights, and a longing for home, patriotic speeches by Colonel Pratt could always lighten the mood and restore order. The men were always enthused when he was around and for many, like Private Vail, he represented a father figure. When the Second Battle of Bull Run ended, and the 20th's beloved Colonel was not there, the hearts of the men had clearly sunk. The Colonel died on September 11th from wounds he received during the Second Battle of Bull Run on August 30, 1862 and Private Vail sums up his life as a commander pretty well stating:

“Colonel Pratt was a much loved and popular officer. He had the best of life before him, being only thirty-two...he had a splendid home on the banks of the Hudson. He sacrificed all for his country. If he could have lived, he would have made a mark for himself, for he was a born soldier.”¹¹

The man who would take Colonel Pratt's place of disciplinarian and father figure for the



Colonel Theodore B. Gates
Photo: <http://www.old-picture.com/civil-war/Theodore-Infantry-Gates-York.htm>

regiment was Colonel Theodore Burr Gates. Gates was born on December 16, 1824 in Oneonta in Otsego County New York. After becoming a lawyer and getting married in 1851, Gates soon embarked on a military career. He joined the 20th New York State Militia and quickly became captain in 1855. For Gates outstanding duties in leading the 20th through Chantilly, South Mountain, Antietam and Gettysburg as well as taking a wound in the left shoulder, citizens from Kingston, Rondout and Saugerties presented

¹⁰ Seward R. Osborne, *The Three-Month Service of the 20th New York State Militia April 28-August 2, 1861*, (Hightstown: Longstreet House, 1998), 20.

¹¹ Enos B. Vail, *Reminiscences of A Boy in the Civil War*, (New York: Forgotten Books, 2012), 91.

him with a sword and sash. Gates responded, “I can only say...that I am deeply touched by this substantial token of their satisfaction...I shall endeavor to give them no occasion to withdraw their confidence.”¹² However, Gates was not without his blunders and with as much fighting as the Ulster Guard partook in, casualties were inevitable. At the Second Battle of Bull Run he led his men in three head on charges through intense fire where nearly half his command became casualties within fifteen minutes.¹³ Gates was always motivated and never backed down from the various engagements of the 20th N.Y.S.M. A man of pure intentions, Gates was morally against slavery and very passionate about the issue stating in his diary, “Lincoln’s emancipation proclamation will take its place...and stand side by side with our Declaration of Independence.”¹⁴ It is this passion that he brought to the Ulster Guard camp and the battlefield every day.

As previously stated, the Second Battle of Bull Run was a horrid day for the Ulster Guard. On August 30th the regiments were formed into two attack lines with the 20th New York being placed on the second of those lines. Around three o’clock the unit was given the order to advance. The two lines moved towards the woods where the enemy was known to be lurking the night before. The Confederates allowed the lines to enter about 200 yards into the woods before opening fire.¹⁵ Coming upon a railroad embankment, Private Vail recounts that “they poured a whole battery of grape and canister into our brigade,” cutting down many good men.¹⁶ The 20th and their brother regiments were startled, greatly outnumbered and forced to retreat while still putting up a good fight as they scattered. Amidst the chaos Private Vail explains, “we were like sheep without a shepherd” as soldiers were mowed down and men were separated from their

¹² Ibid, xii.

¹³ Ibid, xiv

¹⁴ Ibid, 60.

¹⁵ Theodore B. Gates, *The “Ulster Guard” 20th N.Y State Militia and the War of the Rebellion* (New York, 1879), 276.

¹⁶ Enos B. Vail, *Reminiscences of A Boy in the Civil War*, (New York: Forgotten Books, 2012), 76.

regiments.¹⁷ More waves against the enemy were sent and volleys of musket and artillery fire were exchanged. The 20th endured heavy losses and Colonel Pratt and Captain Ward were mortally wounded in the initial run through the woods. For all the wounded, the surgeons poured out morphine without even measuring for certain soldiers whose wounds were severe. The logic was, if the severity of the wounds did not kill him, he would be put out of his misery with the morphine. Colonel Gates diary really emphasizes the death of the battle as he states, “the 20th [was] cut to pieces. And the dead horses, torn uniforms and graves” were a horrendous site.¹⁸

On September 16th 1862, the Ulster Guard went without supper. In preparation for the upcoming battle they laid on their guns all night in the woods along the road. At sunrise, the Battle of Antietam, one of the bloodiest in the Civil War, began. The 20th New York was up early and engaged in action around 6 a.m. The Confederates bombarded the woods with artillery shells where members of the Ulster Guard still laid. The shells exploded with such accuracy that it wounded six men in Private Vail’s company and nearly struck him as well.¹⁹ At this time, most of the Ulster Guard was ordered to support Captain Cambell’s Battery B (4th U.S Artillery) which was positioned on part of the David R. Miller Farm. No previous engagement had prepared the seasoned Ulster Guard for the murder that was to ensue in the Miller cornfield. The battery was located by a field of corn which extended taller than a man claimed Private Vail.²⁰ The cornfield completely concealed the movement of the enemy who snuck through the thick stalks. Private Vail was in a position to see the advance of the confederates and claimed that “they looked like a flock of sheep.”²¹ Storming out of the cornfield the Ulster Guard

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Theodore B. Gates, *The Civil War Diaries of Colonel Theodore B. Gates, 20th New York State Militia*, (Highstown NJ: Longstreet House Publishing, 1991), 29.

¹⁹ Enos B. Vail, *Reminiscences of A Boy in the Civil War*, (New York: Forgotten Books, 2012), 84.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

experienced a hailstorm of bullets while the artillery on the back hill dropped shells with deadly accuracy. Also, sharpshooters crept through the corn and picked off men near Campbell's battery. As the battle fully ensued and Campbell gave the order to fire, Ulster Guard guns "which



Present Day Miller's CornField

Photo: <http://civilwarlandscapes.org/cwla/states/md/an/places/cf05.htm>

had been double shotted with grape and canister tore great gaps in their ranks."²²

However, that did not deter the confederates as they filled the gaps and moved steadily forward. As they came close to the battery the Ulster Guard attacked with bayonets. The confederates retreated, reorganized and came back as determined as ever to

capture the battery. "The slaughter was

awful" as the confederates had to be continuously warded off with bayonet combat, but "the bravery of the enemy won our admiration" exclaimed Private Vail in his remembrance of the battle.²³ So much fighting occurred that the Ulster Guard was out of ammunition and were forced into getting supplies from the dead and wounded in order to keep repulsing confederate attacks. When finally relieved from the fight, a few Ulster Guard volunteers went back into the fray to bring off the wounded. Lieutenant Swarthout and Vail went between the lines getting all the wounded of the regiment that could be found. During the mission, Swarthout dropped dead at Vail's feet, shot in the head by a musket ball. The Twentieth went into battle with 134 men and

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid, 85.

officers, and lost 49 killed and wounded—over 34 per cent of the entire regiment.²⁴ Private Vail describes the carnage as a “slaughter pen.”²⁵ That night the Ulster Guard slept on the field of battle, next to the death and rotting corpses. “The Union and Confederate dead were buried in trenches, and the dead of the enemy were treated as tenderly as our own” explains Private Vail.²⁶

On January 7th, the Ulster Guard along with many other units from the same brigade were transferred to the Provost Guard, commanded by General Patrick. The duties of the Ulster Guard at this point were to guard the railroad and depot of supplies, take charge of military prisoners (which the 20th obtained many), and sometimes conduct railroad trains.²⁷ These duties did not stop the Ulster Guard from fighting as skirmishes were frequent during guard duty and whenever there was a great battle, the 20th militia was called upon. On May 30th 1864 Colonel Gates in his diary writes about the heavy skirmishing that took place during the guarding of a bridge near Hanover Court House. Prisoners were constantly maintained and taken to various holding areas by the Ulster Guard. In one week alone, they rounded up over 700 prisoners.²⁸ These railroad stations and bridges had to be patrolled all day and night and Private Vail makes the facetious claim that “there was more work [on guard duty] than we had while at the front.”²⁹ Colonel Gates was strict during this guard duty just like in camp life and because of the frequency of drinking during these assignments, liquor was banned. Appearances also had to be kept pristine during guard duties or soldiers were reprimanded. While in these Confederate lands, Colonel Gates dined in a restaurant that was owned by a man who opposed succession and stayed in any

²⁴ Ibid, 86.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Theodore B. Gates, *The “Ulster Guard” 20th N.Y State Militia and the War of the Rebellion* (New York, 1879), 344.

²⁸ Theodore B. Gates, *The Civil War Diaries of Colonel Theodore B. Gates, 20th New York State Militia*, (Highstown NJ: Longstreet House Publishing, 1991), 143.

²⁹ Enos B. Vail, *Reminiscences of A Boy in the Civil War*, (New York: Forgotten Books, 2012), 137.

house available.³⁰ Many citizens were hostile to the Union soldiers patrolling and occupying their towns, therefore it was always beneficial to find a friendly store or home owner in the South. Sometimes places to sleep were granted by the citizens, or in one case, the regiment occupied an old church for quarters.³¹ Although the work was hard and the days were long, Guard Duty in the South kept the regiment busy and was a necessary process in the Union victory.

The Ulster Guard performed all of its duties with honor and integrity. Its commanders, Pratt and Gates, kept the men in line and made them a respectful regiment to fight for. The name and legacy of the Ulster Guard was never lost, to the pleasure of grizzled veterans, despite many consolidations and reinforcements. Although the Ulster Guard was assigned a long stretch of guard duty towards the end of the war, the regiment was still classified by historian William Fox among the “three hundred fighting regiments”. The Ulster Guard carried a legacy of discipline and bravery spanning its pre Civil War history to its mustering out in January 1866.³²

³⁰ Theodore B. Gates, *The Civil War Diaries of Colonel Theodore B. Gates, 20th New York State Militia*, (Highstown NJ: Longstreet House Publishing, 1991), 142.

³¹ *Ibid*, 144.

³² New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center, “80th Infantry Regiment: Civil War”, Accessed November 24, 2012. <http://dmna.ny.gov/historic/reghist/civil/infantry/80thInf/80thInfMain.htm>.

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