

VAN HORNE ELLIS

The colonel of the 124th New York, Ellis had led a colorful life even before the Civil War. A graduate of Columbia University, he was at various times a lawyer, a merchant, a tax commissioner in California, a captain in the Hawaiian Navy, and a commercial steamer captain

The Sons of Friends and Neighbors: Orange County's 56th and 124th Regiments of New York Volunteer Infantry

Michael McAfee

During the Civil War the most important organizational unit was the regiment. The usual state volunteer regiment (unlike the Regular Army regiments organized, equipped, and recruited by the national government) comprised ten companies of 100 men each, commanded by a captain. With the staff of regimental officers and non-commissioned staff officers, as well as an occasional regimental band, the typical Civil War regiment numbered just over 1,000 men. Because of the unprecedented numbers of men needed for the war effort, the recruiting and even equipping of the regiments of state volunteers was largely left to state and local officials. The federal government's bureaucracy was geared to a peacetime establishment of about 16,000 men, and was completely unprepared to deal with the hundreds of thousands of troops required for the war.¹

In the spring of 1861, President Lincoln had called upon the various militias of the states for 75,000 men to defend the national capital. The under-strength militia regiments enlisted volunteers and even took in militia companies from regiments that were not going to war to raise themselves to sufficient numbers to go to combat. For example, one of the companies of Orange County's 19th Regiment of Militia joined the 71st Regiment of Militia from New York City; they fought in the Battle of First Bull Run in July 1861.² By law, however, the militia could only be called into duty by the federal government for ninety days a year; once those ninety days were served, the militia returned home.

Since the war would obviously last for more than ninety days, a new type of soldier was created: the state volunteer in federal service. Originally recruited (in the spring and early summer of 1861) to serve for two years, the terms of service for subsequent regiments was extended to three years. These men were recruited at the local level, often with local politicians using their fame or notoriety to enlist

men with the result that the more men recruited, the higher the rank a recruiter could gain. In most cases, however, a local resident did the actual recruiting among his friends and neighbors. These recruiters normally became the captain and lieutenants of the company raised.

This was an interesting system, harkening back to the colonial militia and the Minute Men of the Revolution. While it could not promise military competence, clearly few would enlist to serve under a neighbor whom they disliked or knew to be basically incompetent. In that sense, at least, it probably did weed out some completely undesirable candidates for officers. It also provided an instant sense of camaraderie for the men and assured that any misdeeds or mishaps would become matters of immediate hometown knowledge, perhaps instilling some modest behavior control.

This sense of community was given eloquent expression by Colonel Peter A. Porter of the Eighth Regiment of New York Heavy Artillery. When he was asked to leave his regiment to run for political office, he responded: "I left home in command of a regiment composed mainly of the sons of friends and neighbors, in a measure committed to my care. I can hardly ask for my discharge, while theirs cannot be granted, and I have a strong desire, if alive, to carry back those whom the chances of time and war shall permit to be 'present' and to 'account' in person for all." Porter was killed leading his regiment at the Battle of Cold Harbor in 1864.³

The soldiers who went to war from the Hudson Valley were in every way typical of other volunteers in the Union Army. In Orange County, two regiments—the 56th and 124th Regiments of Volunteer Infantry—were especially prominent. In both, recruits were drawn from citizens of the county, but many men from adjoining Sullivan and Ulster Counties also joined. With a few notable exceptions, New York's regiments were numbered as they were enlisted. Hence, the 56th was raised and went to war several months before the men of the 124th were recruited.⁴

The 56th was organized in the autumn of 1861, after the Union defeat at Bull Run showed the need for further recruitment. It was organized by Representative Charles H. Van Wyck, whose Congressional district included Orange and Sullivan Counties. Its companies were recruited locally as follows: A, B, C, D, and E at Newburgh; F at Liberty; G at Ellenville; H and L at Callicoon Depot; I and K at Monticello.⁵

The regiment's camp was located along the banks of the Hudson River, south of Newburgh. N.P. Willis, the noted Cornwall author, could see the camp from his library window at Idlewild, and was entranced by it, describing the novel sight of the white tents with the noises of reveille, tattoo, and the regimental

band offering a change from the normal “rural music.” To train the men of the regiment, Van Wyck engaged Augustus Van Horne Ellis, a captain of the 71st New York State Militia who had fought at Bull Run. Ellis was a strict disciplinarian, and he turned the 56th into an efficient, well-drilled team. He had evidently been led to believe that he would become colonel of the regiment, but when the time came, Van Wyck decided to keep that rank for himself and Ellis cut off his connection with the 56th and went his own way.⁶

Van Wyck’s regiment was truly distinctive. First, when it was recruited it was larger than the typical regiment, as it included two troops of cavalry, two batteries of light artillery, and an extra infantry company (L) raised as sharpshooters. These five companies were ultimately detached, leaving ten companies of infantry to serve as the 56th Regiment. In its original organization with the artillery and cavalry companies, it was called the “Tenth Legion.”

The title Legion implies a composite organization that includes more than one branch of service in its organization. At one time in the 1790s, General Anthony Wayne had reorganized the United States Army in the same manner, combing infantry and cavalry within the same unit. The experiment ended with Wayne’s death, but several state militias continued the practice. In New York, it was common for an infantry, or foot regiment, to have a cavalry troop or artillery company as part of its organization. For example, the famed Seventh Regiment had a cavalry troop, a howitzer detachment, and an engineer company. So Van Wyck’s Tenth Legion (named after his own Tenth Congressional District) was within the tradition of the New York State Militia, but its hybrid organization was so alien and unworkable a concept to the federal authorities that its noninfantry companies were detached to serve with different units of the same branch of ser-



CHARLES H. VAN WYCK
Congressman and colonel of the 56th New York, Van Wyck was brevetted a brigadier general at the end of the war to honor his wartime services. He was born in Poughkeepsie in 1824 and died in 1895 after serving as U.S. Senator

vice or as independent batteries of light artillery.

The 56th had another distinguishing feature in its early inception. To show their affiliation with the “Tenth Legion,” the jackets of each enlisted soldier bore a shield-shaped cloth insignia on the left breast. A Roman numeral “10” was cut out of the center of each badge so that the dark blue of the jacket showed through the shield as a large X. The infantry companies of the 56th wore a sky blue shield, the artillery batteries had red shields, the cavalry companies orange shields, and the riflemen of Company L green shields.⁷ Long after the shields were discarded, some men of the 56th continued to wear this distinctive badge in the form of a white X painted on the backsides of their black knapsacks.⁸

Late in the fall of 1861, the regiment went to Washington, D. C., where it joined the Army of the Potomac. The following spring, Van Wyck’s “chicken thieves”—a popular title bestowed upon the regiment after a particular incident—were engaged in the campaign to capture the Confederate capitol of Richmond via the Virginia peninsula. It was during this campaign that the 56th suffered its most severe combat casualties, losing one officer and twenty-six enlisted men. (They either died in action or from their wounds.) Five enlisted men were missing and four officers and thirty-five enlisted men recovered from wounds. In the following three years of the war, the 56th lost thirty-seven more enlisted men in combat. However, after the regiment was moved to the theater of operations in the more tropical climate of North and South Carolina in December 1862, three officers and 213 enlisted men died of disease.⁹

The move to the Carolinas had taken the 56th out of the main theater of operations. It never again saw the intense combat it experienced in the Peninsular Campaigns of 1862, but it did see considerable action throughout the campaigns around Charleston, South Carolina. However, the 56th did miss such “glory” battles as Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, and the grinding campaign against Lee in 1864. Those battles would fall to the lot of the other Orange County regiment, the 124th New York Volunteer Infantry, popularly known as the “Orange Blossoms.”

By late spring of 1862, it was obvious that the war was not going well for the Union. The Peninsula Campaign waged by Major General George B. McClellan in a vain attempt to capture Richmond had fizzled, leaving McClellan’s army (and the 56th Regiment) idle in the tidewater channels of eastern Virginia. Now, Washington was being threatened by Confederate armies in the Shenandoah Valley and a new call for volunteer soldiers went out on July 1, 1862. In Orange County, this call was answered when a seven-man committee met at the United States Hotel in Newburgh and recommended the 56th Regiment’s old instruc-

tor, Augustus Van Horne Ellis, for the colonelcy of a regiment to be raised in the county. Ellis's 71st New York State Militia had already been recalled for three months' service in the defenses of Washington, but he was eager to command full-time and serve at the front, so he resigned his militia commission to accept the rank of volunteer colonel.

The recruits for the new regiment were gathered and drilled with sticks and borrowed guns at Camp Wickham in Goshen. Expressing himself succinctly, Ellis stated that he wanted "A regiment of *fighting* men..." However, recruiting was slow. The great rush of patriotism seen in 1861 had slackened as the war's failures and realities had become obvious. Still, the citizen committee that had gathered to garner recruits persevered, and by the end of August Colonel Ellis had a regiment gathered from throughout Orange County. Company A was made up of

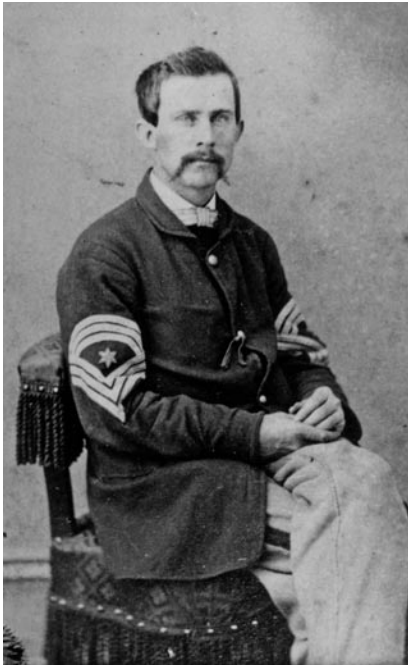
men from nearly every town in the county. Company B was recruited largely in Goshen. Company C was called the Cornwall company. Company D was recruited and organized in Warwick. Company E had men from Mount Hope, Wallkill, Crawford, and Newburgh. Company F came largely from Port Jervis. Company G came from Newburgh, Blooming Grove, New Windsor, Monroe, and Chester. Company H was raised in Montgomery. Company I was from Newburgh, while Company K's men came from Newburgh, Middletown, and Goshen.¹⁰ There was no J Company in these volunteer regiments, supposedly because there was such a similarity between a script I and J that the latter was skipped to avoid paperwork confusion.

On August 26, 1862, the new regiment, christened "The American Guard" by Ellis (the same name as the 71st New York State Militia), received a stand of colors from the "ladies of Orange County." Upon accepting them, Ellis vowed



FRANCIS A. BENEDICT

Benedict enlisted in Company D of the 14th in Goshen. He was killed at the Battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863



MOSES P. ROSS

Ross became the chief bugler of the 124th, and was at Ellis's side when he was killed. He wears the distinctive orange ribbon of the "Orange Blossoms" in the buttonhole second from the top of his sack coat

that, "If you never again see these colors, you will never again see those who bore them from you."¹¹ His words were partially prophetic, for while the tattered flags were returned for replacement, many of those who carried them never came home. On September 6, the regiment departed Goshen for the national capital, where they were attached to the Third Corps of the Army of the Potomac. From then until June 1865, the 124th served through all of the army's battles and all of the vicissitudes of its camps and campaigns. More so than the 56th, the men of Ellis's regiment saw nearly constant battle. While they were essentially observers of the debacle at Fredericksburg, Virginia, in December 1862, thereafter they found themselves on the front line of battle. But it was in their first two battles that Ellis and his men met what was perhaps their greatest trial as soldiers.

The Battle of Chancellorsville, Virginia, in May 1863, was the first for the 124th, and they performed well, losing fifty-seven officers and men killed in combat or mortally wounded—the greatest number of casualties they suffered in any single battle. It was a true test by combat, and it was at Chancellorsville, after Ellis exhorted his men forward, calling them his "Orange Blossoms," that they became well-known by that new nickname and began wearing strips of orange cloth tied in their buttonholes to identify themselves. Shortly after, Robert E. Lee's victorious Army of Northern Virginia invaded the North for a second time, his route eventually bringing him to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. At Gettysburg, the "Orange Blossoms" again proved their mettle but suffered significant casualties.

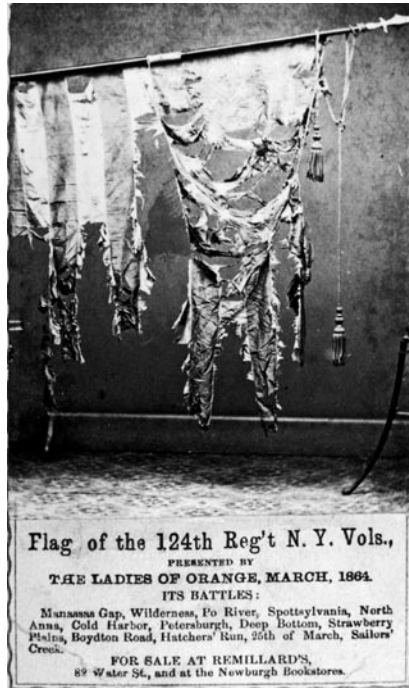
On July 2, 1863, after the Union Army had been driven from the fields north of Gettysburg, the Third Corps was deployed at the southern end of the Union lines. The 124th was positioned to support a New York artillery battery at what is now known as Devil's Den, a rocky outcropping that remains one of Gettysburg's

most prominent landmarks. There the Confederates attacked in superior numbers in an attempt to outflank the Union forces and gain control of high ground at the end of the Union lines—hills named Big and Little Round Tops. The 124th and its supporting regiments were in their way.

As the 124th watched the approaching mass of Confederates, Ellis was fully aware that he must strive to hold his position and inflict as many casualties as he could. Keeping his eager men in check, Ellis withheld fire until the enemy was within effective range, and then the 124th delivered a staggering volley. As the Confederates continued to advance despite the fire of the “Orange Blossoms,” Major James Cromwell mounted his horse, saying, “The men must see us today.” With a nod of approval from Ellis, he then led a desperate charge into the advancing Confederates. Cromwell was shot dead and many “Orange Blossoms” fell among the rocky fields, but the enemy hesitated in its advance, giving the Union army time to reinforce its left flank and ultimately hold the line behind the 124th at the Round Tops. Among the casualties, however, was Ellis himself. He was shot dead, falling from his horse while calling upon his soldiers to hold their position as long as possible. For forty minutes his men and their comrades in the adjoining regiments had held back an entire corps, helping to save the day for the Union army.

The 124th continued to fight in the Army of the Potomac for nearly two more years. In the process, five of its members earned Medals of Honor for acts of bravery. In June 1865, the regiment returned to New York, arriving at Newburgh aboard the *Mary Powell*, where they were greeted by their jubilant fellow citizens of Orange County.

The 56th remained on duty in South Carolina for several months more, not mustering out until October 1865. Despite the fact that it had not been so heavily engaged in battle as the 124th,



**THE SECOND NATIONAL COLOR
OF THE “ORANGE BLOSSOMS”**

This flag, or color, was presented to the regiment by “The Ladies of Orange” in March 1864. Photographed a year later, it shows the ravages of combat after the 124th returned home for the final time

the men of the 56th had suffered equally. The regiment lost sixty-four men dead or mortally wounded, as well as 216 men to disease, for a total of 280 casualties. Despite its greater combat deaths (148), the 124th suffered fewer fatalities from disease (93), giving it a total of 241 deaths. In these two regiments alone, 521 “sons of friends and neighbors”—as well as husbands, fathers, and brothers—perished in the war.¹² Countless more were left with permanent scars from the fratricidal conflict. Orange County had done its duty and suffered the consequences. In the process, it regiments left an immortal story as part of the history of the Hudson River Valley.

Notes

Both the 56th and 124th Regiments were chronicled in regimental histories written by members of their respective regiments. *A Condensed History of the 56th Regiment New York Veteran Volunteer Infantry*, was compiled by Joel C. Fiske and William H.D. Blake, published by the Newburgh Journal Printing House and Book Bindery in 1906. The *History of the One Hundred and Twenty-Fourth Regiment, N. Y. S. V.*, was written by Charles H. Weygant, and was published in 1877 by the same Journal Printing House. Both are invaluable in researching the history and foibles of these two regiments.

1. See *They Fought for the Union*, by Dr. Francis A. Lord, The Stackpole Company, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania (1960), for a complete history of the recruiting, composition, and organization of the Union Army in the Civil War.
2. *New York in the War of the Rebellion, 1861 to 1865*, compiled by Frederick Phisterer, D. B. Lyon Company, State Printers (Albany, 1912), 691.
3. *The Honors of the Empire State in the War of the Rebellion*, by Thomas S. Townsend. A. Lovell & Co. (New York, 1899), 271.
4. Phisterer, 9-46.
5. Op cit., 2471-2472.
6. Fiske & Blake.
7. *The New York Tribune*, 29 October 1861, 5.
8. Original knapsack in the collections of the West Point Museum, Cat. No. 9550.
9. *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*, by Frederick H. Dyer, Thomas Yoseloff (New York, 1959), Vol. III., 1425.
10. Weygant, 12-34.
11. Op. cit., 30.
12. Dyer, Vol. III, 1425 & 1453.