"but alas! our Country calls" The Formation of the 124th New York State Volunteers, July 1–September 6, 1862

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The 124th New York State Volunteers was one of the great fighting regiments of the Civil War. Known by the nickname "Orange Blossoms," the regiment was comprised of nearly 1,000 Orange County farmers, shopkeepers, laborers, and mechanics. They served as part of the Army of the Potomac, the main Federal army in the field, and fought opposite the finest soldiers the South could send against them, led by the already legendary Robert E. Lee. As part of so mighty an army and against so formidible an opponenet, the 124th forged a reputation in fire and blood. The regiment fought in every major engagement in the East and counted among its number five Medal of Honor recipients. When it marched to Washington's Headquarters in Newburgh to be mustered out of service at the end of the war, only 130 of the original volunteers were present and still in uniform. They were truly—as the local newspapers of the day called them—"this regiment of heroes."

By the summer of 1862, the war for the Union was not going well. Many in the North thought it should have long since been over, decided in one big battle. Even after the embarrassing defeat at Bull Run in July 1861, the North quickly regained its balance, calling up thousands more volunteers and bringing its considerable industrial and financial muscle to bear on the war effort. Northerners had every reason to expect that the second summer of war would see the defeat of the Confederate armies and the swift restoration of the Union. Then in a string of spectacular Confederate victories in the Shenandoah Valley—and within sight of Richmond—the Union armies were again humiliated.

It was at last clear that the forces then at hand—state militia regiments, U.S. Regulars, and volunteer regiments from the states—could not reunite the nation.

What was needed was a mighty army of long-term volunteers. Led by New York Governor Edwin D. Morgan, the loyal governors appealed to President Abraham Lincoln for "prompt and vigorous measures," urging him "that you at once call upon the several states for such numbers of men as may be required to fill up all military organizations now in the field…and to speedily crush the rebellion that still exists in several of the Southern States…"

On July 1, 1862, Lincoln replied to the governors by issuing a call for an additional 300,000 volunteers. He thought that the troops should be "chiefly of infantry" and promised that the following day the War Department would set the quota each state was to provide. Governor Morgan quickly issued a proclamation in response to Lincoln's message:

> The President of the United States has duly called upon the country for an additional force of three hundred thousand volunteers to serve for three years, or the war… This appeal is to the State of New York; it is to each citizen. Let it come to every fireside. Let the glorious example of the Revolutionary period be our emulation. Let each feel that the Commonwealth now counts upon his individual strength and influence to meet the demands of the Government… We cannot doubt that the insurrection is in its death throes; that a mighty blow will end its monstrous existence…. Present happiness and future greatness will be secured by responding to the present call. Let the answer go back to the President and to our brave soldiers in the field, that in New York the patriotic list of the country's defenders is augmented. It will strengthen the hands of the one, and give hope and encouragement to the other.

New York's quota in this call was to be 59,705 men. The state was divided into military districts, each with a recruiting committee of prominent citizens appointed by the governor. These committees had the power to select colonels whose job it was to gather the men together at rendezvous places to begin their training; each colonel would receive his commission when his regiment was filled. The 9th Recruiting District, comprising Orange and Sullivan counties, was to raise 1,800 men, 1,200 from Orange County, the remainder from Sullivan.

Towns within each recruiting district were given quotas as well. Newburgh, a prosperous commercial center on the Hudson River, was to provide 285 men to the new regiment, even though numerous volunteers from the city had joined the 56th New York just the year before. Rural Greenville was to contribute twenty-three men from among its farmers and herdsmen. Goshen, the county seat, was to send fifty-seven men, while the prosperous farming community of Montgomery

was to raise seventy-six.

Calling for troops and actually getting men to enlist were very different matters. The committee appointed by the governor for the 9th Recruiting District (Tenth Congressional District) faced a daunting task, but they let nothing hamper their efforts. These community leaders were loyal Union men no matter their political party affiliation, and they pitched into the work with vigor. It was noted in the local press that most of the original members of the committee lived in close proximity to one another in an area just south of Newburgh. This was intentional, so the members could be called together quickly to take up the pressing task. Their prosperous homesteads, some of the wealthiest in Orange County, were close to the population center of the county and also close to a neighbor whom they had in mind to lead the new regiment. Meeting in Newburgh on July 11, the committee offered the command to Captain Augustus Van Horne Ellis of the 71st New York State Militia.

The 71st was stationed near Washington, D. C., but Captain Ellis, knowing full well that there was an opportunity to lead one of the new regiments, had taken leave to return home. "Capt. Ellis, of the 71st is still here," reported the *Newburgh Daily Telegram*, "having returned home in order to ascertain what steps are to be taken in regard to the new levy of troops." When the announcement was made that Ellis would lead the new regiment, the press was quick to approve of the appointment. "The Captain has what might be called a fighting reputation: i.e. he is a man who believes that the soldier's business is to do as much damage to the enemy as possible; and those who enlist under him may expect to be immediately taken into active service, and not left to vegetate in the useful but inglorious work of guarding posts remote from the scene of danger." (*Goshen Democrat*, July 17, 1862) There can be little doubt that members of the committee had contacted him well ahead of time, urging him to make himself available, as it was likely he would be offered the command. When it came, Ellis accepted without hesitation. Resigning his commission in the 71st, he immediately made his way to Albany for instructions.

The very next day, Ellis was back in Newburgh to begin the work of recruiting the ten companies, each with a captain, two lieutenants, and over eighty enlisted volunteers, a fact noted with pride in the local press. "Orange and Sullivan Ahead!" was the bold title of the article detailing Ellis's new job:

> Col. Ellis has received his appointment—the first issued under the new levee. The Governor was not a little astonished at the promptness of the action. The men who follow Col. Ellis will find something to do. The selection made for a colonel of the new regiment is an excellent one, and

> one that will command the confidence of our entire people. Col. Ellis is an energetic man of business, as brave as he is patriotic, a thorough disciplinarian, and by nature and education immanently fitted for the position. Men of Orange and Sullivan! You have already done nobly, more than your share, as men reckon a fair division of burdens, but now do better! Fill up the ranks promptly and well, show to the Union that the Old Tenth is never appealed to in vain when the country is called for duty… (*Newburgh Telegraph*, July 12, 1862)

In this stirring appeal, no mention was made that prior military experience might be a requirement for becoming an officer in the regiment. At least seven men set up recruiting locations in Newburgh and were calling on their friends and neighbors to enlist in their companies; of these would-be leaders, only one had any prior military service. (*Newburgh Telegraph* August 9, 1862)

Ellis was not shy about saying what he required of his company-grade officers: "I want, for subordinate officers, men who will not only be able in pushing forward the organization, but most likely to render efficient services at the front—for those who follow me to the field may rest assured they will never, if I can prevent it, have reason to complain of being kept in the rear. A regiment of men is one thing. A regiment of fighting men is another thing. The country needs, and I want, the latter."

The newspapers continued to publish articles laudatory of Ellis, but just as the work of recruiting the new regiment was getting underway, a cloud darkened the prospects for a good start. The *Journal*, one of several daily and weekly newspapers in the city of Newburgh, published a report that during the Battle of Bull Run—where Ellis had led a two-gun battery as part of the 71st New York Militia—he had been knocked down by a piece of exploding shell from enemy cannon fire and left for dead by the men under his command. The story seemed to impugn both the behavior of the captain and that of his men in the face of the enemy. It drew an immediate and heated reply:

> Mr. Editor:—As you are always willing to do justice to all, I would like to say something in reply to an article in The Journal of Saturday, in regard to Capt. A. V. H. Ellis… Such is not true, for there was not a man in the Company who would leave a man under such circumstances; and the statement is not doing justice to the brave boys who always obeyed his orders. When Johnston's reinforcements were close upon us, at Bull Run, Capt. Ellis was as cool as on a parade, and the boys rallied around him, and came off in excellent order. Ward Beecher. (*Newburgh Telegraph*, July 14, 1862)

This seemed to put to rest any inference that Ellis was lacking in leadership, military skill, or bravery. In fact, the newspapers redoubled their praise of him.

Ellis needed to fill out the field and staff officers in the regiment, which included the positions of lieutenant colonel, major, and adjutant. For his second in command, he chose Francis Marko Cummins, a veteran of the Mexican War. More important than this was the fact that Cummins had also fought in several Civil War battles to the west: Wilson's Creek, Dug Springs, and Shiloh. Here was a soldier who had not only *seen* battle but had *led men* in battle. There were persistent rumors that Cummins was drunk at Shiloh, but Ellis had confidence that his leadership abilities did not come from the bottle. For the position of adjutant, he chose William Silliman of Cornwall. Silliman's abrupt manner did nothing to endear him to the men, who took to referring to him as "Old Silly Man." For the time being, the major's slot remained vacant.

To spur enlistments across the state, Governor Morgan issued a proclamation offering a bounty of fifty dollars for every new volunteer. At the same time, towns and villages in Orange and Sullivan counties began to raise additional funds to help in the recruitment effort. The Town of Montgomery voted a sixty-dollar bounty for each of fifty recruits. The Village of Chester held a rally that raised $900 in nine minutes for the same purpose. Chester quickly filled its quota of thirty-six men, twenty-five of whom went with Charles D. Wood to join Charles Weygant's Company A; the rest allied themselves with Frederick F. Wood, who (together with the men raised by James Denniston of Blooming Grove) joined Captain Isaac Nicoll's Company G. It is interesting to note that some of these men assumed ranks of captain or lieutenant before they were mustered into the regiment. Wood, for instance, was referred to as a captain while recruiting but started his military career with the 124th New York as the first lieutenant of Company A. Frederick Wood, gathering men as a lieutenant, later signed on as a sergeant in Company G. (*Goshen Democrat*, August 18, 1862)

As the ten companies were filling up, it can be surmised that serious negotiations took place as to who would assume which ranks as these ambitious young men jockeyed for position. "All the towns in the county are waking up," a reporter noted in an article written about the new regiment. (*Newburgh Telegraph*, August 8, 1862) Newburgh took the lead, raising through pledges well over $10,000. The names of the donors and the amounts pledged were prominently listed in the newspaper.

This money was an important inducement to enlist. A private in the Union army was paid thirteen dollars per month but, as the men soon found out, the paymaster did not appear at regular intervals. The prospect of leaving one's fam-

ily destitute caused many potential recruits to think twice about enlisting. But the money paid to a volunteer, possibly more than $100, would at least get his family through the first winter of his absence. William Howell, of Howell's Depot, Orange County, began to keep what he called a "record of military service," in which he detailed the money he received for enlisting: "September 2nd, $50 state bounty, September 4th, $10 from the town, September 5th, $25 from the U states." (Had Howell been a resident of Montgomery, his town bounty would have been fifty dollars more.)

During the first week of August 1862, the *Goshen Democrat* reported that men were arriving in the village every day, much more rapidly than had been the case the previous year when the 56th New York was being recruited from the same two counties. This optimistic appraisal was tempered with an admonishment that there were plenty of able-bodied men in the area not willing to step forward to defend the republic:

> In some sections of the County, however, we hear from the people who do not appear to be sufficiently awake to the vast importance of having our Regiment filled up at once. It appears to us that supine ness at such a time as this, when our country is menaced by bitter and barbarous enemies, and when her noble defenders now in the field, are calling to us for reinforcements, is wicked and criminal in the highest degree. Do those who look on the mighty struggle in which we are engaged, with so much apparent unconcern, realize what is at stake, or that the future peace, prosperity, and happiness of the present as well as succeeding generations is seriously jeopardized thereby? The simple declaration that our liberties,—the Union itself is in imminent peril, should be potent enough to rouse the veriest sluggard, and fire the heart that has never before throbbed with a single patriotic impulse. Our liberties were won by the sword, in the hands of men who allowed no considerations whatever to intervene to prevent the accomplishment of the object they had in view, and by the same agency and in a like determined spirit, must we all labor now, to preserve them. Shall it not be done? (Goshen Democrat, August 7, 1862)

Talk of rousing the "sluggards" missed the point: hundreds of thousands of Union soldiers were presently under arms, yet the war went on. Casualty figures from regiments like the 18th New York, 36th New York, and 56th New York—which drew men from the area—were published in the newspapers for all to see. One had only to read the long lists of names (many of friends or relatives) to understand that things were not going well.

It was not just the men who were killed outright that depressed the fighting spirit of the North. The rolls of the wounded filled columns in the newspapers. These often listed the nature of the wound, detailing a body part sacrificed, and for what? Union generals seemed unable to win a single battle while the Rebels were led to victory after victory. Clearly, local men were fully aware of what was at stake and were neither supine nor unconcerned. What was also clear to them was that inept generals were leading brave men to their deaths. Further, some agreed that the South had every right to leave the Union, for where did the Constitution prevent a sovereign state from doing just that? The legal issues aside, many in the North felt the South, with it's backward institution of slavery, was an embarrassment. They saw the hypocrisy of insisting on the freedoms guaranteed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution on one hand and enslavement based upon race on the other.

And then there were the local Peace Democrats, known as Copperheads, who opposed the war for a host of reasons, ranging from racist fear that the freed slaves would swarm North, taking jobs and mixing in white society, to a virulent hatred of the Lincoln administration and all things Republican.

Even as the 124th New York was forming, law-enforcement authorities were moving against those in Orange County who opposed the war. Citing an order issued by President Lincoln, Constable William A. Cooley of Cornwall arrested Dr. W.F.C. Beattie and John E. Ryder, both of whom "opposed enlistments and otherwise manifested their treasonable sentiments." It was reported that the two men, held in Cornwall, would be delivered to the United States Marshall in New York City. (*Goshen Democrat*, August 14, 1862)

Opposition to the war was hardly confined to Cornwall. Middletown was home to two decidedly antiwar, anti-Republican newspapers. The first was the *Banner of Liberty*, whose masthead proclaimed "An Independent National Newspaper, Advocating Civil and Religious Freedom, the Constitution and the Union, and Exposing Priestcraft and all its Cognate Isms." The last part reflected an anti-Catholic, nativist sentiment sometimes associated with the early Republicans, a party regularly reviled in the pages of editor G.J. Beebe's popular newspaper. It was widely believed that Beebe closed his paper in September 1861 to prevent its being suppressed by the administration he hated and to avoid possible arrest. A second antiwar paper soon took up the cause of the Copperheads. *The Mercury* was far more virulent in its attacks on the administration and its policy of emancipation. Both papers played to a nascent racism all too prevalent in Orange County, urging readers to oppose the war, the Lincoln administration, the draft, volunteering, and anything else that might support the war. It was said

that soldiers home on leave were attacked in the streets of Middletown if they dared to wear their uniforms in public. John Hasbrouck, editor of the pro-war *Middletown Whig Press*, was himself caned for his editorial attacks on the antiwar element.

Into this hotbed came Col. Ellis and members of the recruiting committee seeking volunteers. On Saturday evening, August 7, Gothic Hall in Middletown was packed to capacity, with an overflow crowd spilling out into the streets. Local Union men joined Ellis and Lt. Col. Cummins, who made patriotic appeals to the assembled crowd inside and outside the hall. Their efforts met with approval, but they were upstaged by War of 1812 veteran Moses H. Corwin. The old soldier rose dramatically and said that if Col. Ellis needed but one volunteer to complete his regiment, he could count on him to be that thousandth man. The crowd went wild, cheering Corwin and the cause he espoused. It was not recorded how many recruits volunteered that night, but a very large subscription was pledged to encourage volunteering.

The pace of recruitment quickened during the first two weeks of August. "Companies are organizing in all directions," reported the *Newburgh Telegraph*. "We met Col. Ellis this morning and found him in fine spirits. His regiment is progressing finely. By tomorrow night he will have 200 men in camp at Goshen, where they are under drill by Lieut. Cressy."

Col. Ellis needed to find an area of open ground large enough to house, feed, and train his men, and he went to the top of Orange County society to find one. He contacted Bridget McDonell Wickham, widow of General George D. Wickham, a militia officer in the War of 1812. Ellis asked her for permission to use her property in Goshen as the camp for the regiment. She readily agreed, acquiescing to his further request that the camp be named for her late husband. "Accept my thanks for the compliment and best wishes for a speedy success of the Regiment you command, in putting down this unholy rebellion," she wrote the colonel.

The men recruiting in Newburgh were having such success that a company under Charles Weygant was full and ready to report to Goshen with five sergeants, eight corporals, two buglers, two musicians, and eighty-three privates. However, before his company could even get settled in Goshen, five of Weygant's privates deserted. (Descriptive Muster Book of the One Hundred and Twenty Fourth Regiment N. Y. Vols., National Archives) A second company was forming in the county seat itself and a third in Cornwall would be full in a matter of days. Now it became a race to get the men to Goshen as soon as possible. The first company to be enrolled would be designated Company A, the second Company B, and so on. This established seniority for promotion when vacancies occurred among the

field grade officers (major, lieutenant colonel, and colonel) and also established position in the line of battle. Companies were placed with a senior company next to a junior company. Company A was given the position of honor on the right flank, B on the left flank, and C in the center with the colors. The rest of the companies—D through K—would be positioned based on the seniority of their captains, no two junior captains next to each other. As very few officers of the 124th had any military experience whatsoever, and because the ten company commanding officers were mustered within a few days of each other, the seniority issue was really one of form rather than substance.

Ellis set up his headquarters in Goshen, giving the village a decidedly martial appearance. At about this time, he started to refer to his burgeoning military unit as the "American Guard," a tribute paid to his old outfit, the 71st Militia, which also bore that nickname. It is also likely that he did so as a remembrance of his younger brother, Captain Julius Ellis, who was mortally wounded while leading Company F of the 71st at Bull Run. (Frederick Phisterer, *New York in the War of the Rebellion*, 1861-1865 (Albany: D.B. Lyon Company, 1912; 32-33)

"The recruits are a fine body of men, both physically and mentally," wrote a reporter. "They have a well fitting fine blue cloth frock coat, and a flannel blouse for undress uniform; good under-clothing in abundance is also on hand." Under the command of the new colonel, who already had quite a reputation as a stern drill master, and a number of company commanders who were now present in Goshen, the men began to learn the rudiments of drill and military discipline. (*Newburgh Telegraph*, July 31, 1862) Since no weapons were available from the state or federal government, the men were drilled using sticks or borrowed civilian weapons. (Charles H. Weygant, *History of the 124 Regiment of New York State Volunteers: The Orange Blossom Regiment,* 1877; *Newburg: Newburgh Journal Printing House, 1877;* 31)

Provisions had to be made to clothe, feed, and house the recruits massing at the once sleepy county seat. By mid-August, five huge barracks had been erected, each 100 by forty feet in size, with additional smaller outbuildings erected for cooking meals and feeding the men. (*Goshen Democrat* August 14, 1862) A restaurateur from Newburgh named Odell was given the contract to provide meals for the soldiers, one of whom wrote, "We had barrocks to sleep in and straw for beds with bread and milk, boiled rice, and white beans for grub." (Capt. John Wood Houston, *Short Sketch of the 124th New York Vols.*). While the newspapers reported that "the soldiers are well satisfied with the provisions furnished them," letters written by the soldiers after they departed the camp for the war contain comments that the army rations they had later were superior to what was fed to

them in Goshen. (*Goshen Democrat*, August 21, 1862) In fact, the food, barracks, and the site itself left much to be desired; when the barracks were later torn down, the townsfolk were relieved to see the eyesores destroyed. The site of Camp Wickham was chosen without any input from local citizens, who could have told Ellis that the drainage and water supply there were not up to sanitary standards of the day. Sickness during the hot August encampment was probably the result of poor sanitary conditions and unhealthy drinking water. (*Goshen Democrat* September 11, 1862)

"A finer body of men, or more orderly and well behaved, could not be got together…Col. Ellis and his officers are untiring in their efforts to have the Regiment ready to leave for the seat of War, at the earliest moment," reported the *Goshen Democrat* on August 21. If indeed the men were orderly and well-behaved, it was because Ellis sought to instill in his civilians-in-uniform an understanding that a well-disciplined regiment was an effective fighting regiment and that drill had a purpose. The ability to move quickly and efficiently on the battlefield, to load and fire in unison, and to obey without question the orders of the officers meant that they would be able to inflict upon the enemy more punishment than the enemy could inflict upon them. Ellis had learned the importance of discipline in the gold fields of California, as a captain on one of Cornelius Vanderbilt's steamers, and on the battlefield at Bull Run. Poorly led and poorly trained units had marched off to war with great promise of doing great things, only to dissolve into chaos when pressed by the enemy. Ellis knew that he must forcefully put his men under his command immediately, before they had a chance to develop ideas contrary to his own. He set about doing that as soon as the men began to gather at Goshen.

Ellis tempered his famous profane vocabulary when civilians were around, but an incident that took place a month after the regiment was mustered serves to illustrate his ability to use it to instill fear in his men. Sergeant William Wirt Bailey, of Company K, wrote home to his father: "The Col. sometimes does swear big, that is when he gets mad." The incident involved Bailey's friend, Sergeant Daniel Webb (also of Company K), who was serving as the left guide during a battalion drill. Whenever a company moved from a column of four men abreast into the a line of battle, a designated soldier (usually the 2nd sergeant), was to move up quickly to take the left-most position of the company, while the 1st sergeant served as the right guide. Between the two, they aligned the company in a straight front before moving on to another evolution. This movement had to be done correctly by each of the ten companies. Sergeant Bailey readily agreed that the job of the 2nd sergeant was critical. "If the second Sergeant does not guess

the right distance, it will throw the whole Regt. out of mash. I think they have almost as much to do on parade as the Captains." (Bailey, September 25, 1862) Daniel Webb was not in his proper place when the maneuver was completed, and this brought the wrath of Colonel Ellis down upon him. "The Col. came around and drew his sword as if to strike him and said, 'I will cut your God dam little head off and then skeddle.'" Bailey remarked that he and Webb's friends found the incident hilarious and teased him about it later, having a "good laugh" every time one of them related the story. He also remarked that he did not laugh at the time of the incident, for to do so during drill would further inflame the colonel and have his anger directed at him instead of the hapless Sergeant Webb. Later, out of earshot of Ellis, he laughed at how fear caused Webb's eyes to bulge out like "peeled onions." (Camp DeKalb, Sunday 21st, Va. OC Historian's Office).

Private Henry Dill, of Captain Isaac Nicolls' Company G (sometimes called the "praying company" because of the strong religious tone of some of its members), related another incident demonstrating Ellis's temper. As Dill told the story, improvising spelling and grammar, "Wee Ware marching Along the other Day and man said that is A Damed purty Looking Regment." This mocking tone brought an immediate response from Ellis. The colonel rode right up to the man, who was seated on a wagon and might well have been a teamster in the pay of the government. Ellis pointedly asked if he thought he could do better than the men marching past him. "Yes," answered the man, "and a Beter son of Bitch of A Cornel to." This was too much for Ellis, who dismounted and ordered the man off his wagon. Too late realizing that Ellis was in no mood for jokes at his own expense, the driver refused. Ellis reached up and swiftly pulled the man down. He then beat him in front of the regiment, put him under guard, and marched him four miles before releasing him. Private Dill was duly impressed. "I tell you Cornel Eles is A man and Wont Let His Boys Be imposed on." (Henry Dill to William Blak[e?], November 30, 1862.)

The mocking of new recruits by veteran troops is a time-honored military tradition. Accounts of it can be found in letters home, in the regimental history of the 124th New York, and even in the great novel of the Civil War, *The Red Badge of Courage*. However traditional it was to be teased by soldiers who had actually been in battle, to be laughed at by a seedy wagon driver could not be tolerated. Ellis's assault on the man demonstrated his absolute unwillingness to have his own competence called into question, but it showed something more: He would not allow his men to be demeaned by anyone. What happened to the wagon driver is a good example of Ellis's ability to seize dramatic moments to instill elan in his men. It was not the first time he did it, nor would it be the last.

But all this was yet to come. The men gathered in Goshen were still basically civilians, and would continue to be so until Ellis and the other officers could get them away from familiar surroundings to begin their training. "It was very hard for the men to be compelled to remain in camp and many a one stole between the sentinels who were armed with sticks as there were no guns in camp at that time," wrote young Lieutenant John Houston. One evening in late August, as the regiment was formed up for dress parade, the cry of "Fire!" was heard from the direction of the village and flames could be seen from a residence. Without being dismissed, the entire regiment broke ranks and went "helter-skelter across fields for Goshen." Ellis himself had belonged to a fire company in California during the Gold Rush, so there can be little doubt that he was in the lead. Fighting the fire was hot work, and the boys shared a "social glass" with the appreciative townspeople whose homes and property they had rushed to protect. After dark, they all came back to camp "of their own accord," none having to be rounded up. Lieutenant Houston commented that they were in "fair condition," having not imbibed too much while battling the flames. "So you see the discipline of the soldier had its good effect in that early day." (Houston, *Short Sketch of the 124th New York Vols*.)

The men were settling into the routine of camp life. One new recruit, John Z. Drake of Captain Ira Bush's Company F (from Port Jervis), wrote that he had not been feeling well, perhaps another victim of the polluted water. He had been so sick that "I didn't eat nothing but I can eat as much as any of them now. We have Plenty of fun here in Camp. We have got all of our uniforms all but our guns. We are to have miney rifles." (Robert and Megan Simpson, *The Civil War Letters of John Zephaniah Drake,* 1996) This camp rumor proved to be incorrect. By "miney rifles," Private Drake was referring to the modern rifle musket, manufactured at federal arsenals by one of several American subcontractors or imported from Europe. The most common rifle muskets were the American-made Springfield or British Enfield. Due to technological advances in the weapon itself and in the design of the ammunition, Springfields and Enfields were accurate at great distance. Just as important, the bullet packed a far more powerful punch than previous arms issued to American troops. Private Drake would be disappointed to learn that they would not be issued Enfields for many months, but instead would have heavy, awkward "2nd Class Arms."

Recruitment was so successful that it soon became clear that there would be more than enough volunteers to bring the regiment to full strength with just the men signed up so far. Ellis was faced with the problem of what to do with those forming companies that would not be needed. He revoked his order that recruits

for the "American Guard" gathering in Sullivan County report to Goshen and instead ordered that they remain there to form the nucleus of a new regiment to be commanded by one of their own officers.

Within a very short time, Colonel Ellis reported to the adjutant general of New York that he had 928 men enrolled in his new regiment awaiting orders. (*Newburgh Daily Telegraph*, August 14, 1862) When Ellis reported that his regiment was at full strength, it was just a matter of time before they would be officially mustered into federal service and entrained for points south. Every town in Orange County buzzed at the prospect of the emotion and ceremony of that occasion. As nearly 1,000 of its sons, husbands, fathers, and brothers prepared to depart for the great war of the rebellion, the distant, ominous rumblings of historic clashes at Cedar Mountain and the Second Battle of Bull Run reverberated through the land. These Union defeats heightened concern for the fate of the Union and for the safety of the soldiers who now formed the 124th New York.

Some were concerned with more than just the physical safety of the men. On August 19, Hannah C. Johnston sat down to write a letter to her younger brother, Joseph H. Johnston, whom she affectionately called Josey. He had only recently enlisted in Captain William McBirney's Company E, 124th New York. She intended for him to read the farewell letter and poem that accompanied it one month after his arrival in Washington, D.C. The year before, their brother, Frank Johnston, had volunteered to serve in a Missouri cavalry regiment. What made things all the more difficult was that the Johnston family were Quakers.

> Milton, N.Y. August 19th 1862.
>
> My dear brother
>
> It is with a sad heart that I now undertake the task of writing a farewell letter for you to read when you are many miles away from me. My sadness is caused by the thoughts of being so far…but alas! our Country calls for your services in regaining her honor and freedom and we must make the sacrifice, hard though it be to do so. I give you up to the care and protection of that Almighty Preserver who has so mercifully and wonderfully preserved our brother through many and fearful dangers. O do put your trust in him and try to do your duty as he would have you do it. Now my dear brother when you are so far from me will you not at my request try to give your heart to him and make up your mind to serve him with a perfect heart, praying to him every day for assistance that you may be prepared to live or die as it shall please him. Then you will be kept from taking part in the many vices and bad habits which always attend in a greater or less degree, a Camp life. You will probably see many and frequent examples of drunkeness, lying, stealing

perhaps and what is probably most frequent is swearing. O what my beloved brother sounds more sinful and degrading than taking the name of God in vain. He who upholds the whole Universe, by his power must never be spoken of except with greatest reverence. O remember this and if you are tempted at any time to do so or say anything which you know to be wrong, resolve not to do it, and pray silently in your own mind for assistance to keep that resolve. And believe me when I say that you will never be sorry for doing so, even if you live to be an old man. You may be laughed at by wicked persons for not joining with them in their sinfulness but those very persons will think more of you for it and will like you better than they will those who are like them-selves. I am sure of this for I know it by experience. I have been with such persons myself. Never play cards with persons who would play for money or drink. If you want something to pass away the time pleasantly, either read some good book or read of the letters which you receive from home, or try to find some good moral or religious person to talk with, or if none of these suit go alone by yourself and there think of home and friends, and you may always know we are thinking of you, for there will scarcely an hour pass without I think of your. I want you also to go alone and try to think upon religious and good things. Spend much of your time in writing letters home. Write good long ones and give us all the particulars which you know. Since Frank went away you know how anxious we are to hear from him, so you may know how glad we will be always to have letters from you, even if they are short, so that we know you are well and by all means do not neglect one hour to write to me when there has been any fighting, for you know how we will feel until we hear from you. My darling brother I know you have always been very careful about keeping good company, and I trust you will ever continue to be friendly to all but intimate with none but the best of all men. Always avoid getting into petty passions or quarreling with any one. You will not find a man in Camp worth quarreling with, and I hope you will treat them as if you thought so. Have no words with them when angry, this has been a great cause of anxiety with me in having you leave home so young, do not talk to an angry man, but I know that if you are determined to do right whatever cross you have to bear you will by the grace of God most surely succeed. And now closing this with a sweet farewell I earnestly pray God to have you in his keeping, to help you bravely to do your duty, and return you safely to the ever fond embrace of your most loving devoted sister

Hannah C. Johnston.

The war that split the nation also split the Johnston family. The Quaker Meeting to which they belonged could not abide the fact that the brothers had joined to fight, and both Frank and Josey were expelled. Only one was alive at the end of the war to rejoin the Meeting.

In ceremonies repeated throughout the north that late summer of 1862, each regiment prepared for its departure. Families again flooded the camps to make sure that their soldiers had with them all manner of Bibles, images (as photographs were called), extra clothing, preserves, handguns, knives, portable writing desks, toiletries, and other items. Some of these were actually useful or embodied such powerful reminders of home and loved ones that they found a place in the soldier's knapsack. But most, just too heavy or bulky to carry, were discarded along the road on the first march.

Even the advertisements in the local press looked to the needs of the men. One read: "Soldiers! see to your own heath, do not trust to the Army supplies; Cholera, Fever, and Bowel complaint will follow your slightest indiscretion. Holloway's Pills and Ointment should be in every man's knapsack—The British and French troops use no other medicines. Only 25 cents per Box or Pot." (*Goshen Democrat*, September 11, 1862)

Soldiers were making preparations for going off to war in other ways. Under the heading "Marriages" in one local newspaper were listed the following:

> Moses Ross, Chief Bugler of the 124th Regt., to Miss E. Vail
> Curtis Ackerman, of Co. E, 124th Regt., to Miss Ann Hall
> Ezra Hyatt, of Co. D, 124th Regt., to Miss Barbara Fitzgerald.
>
> (*Goshen Democrat*, August 28, 1862)

Private Patrick Leach, of Captain Murray's Company B, either brought a pistol to camp or was presented one by a wellwisher. While handling it, the weapon discharged. The ball passed through a one-inch wallboard and struck the wife of Private John Eckert (also of Company B) while she was talking to her husband inside his barracks. (*Goshen Democrat*, September 11, 1862) The wound was so serious that Private Eckert was furloughed to remain in Goshen to nurse his wife back to health. She recovered sufficiently for his to return to the regiment in time for the Battle of Chancellorsville seven months later. (*Goshen Independent*)

Unlike the enlisted men, officers were expected to provide their own uniforms and weapons. Here was an opportunity for friends and family to present items of real value and significance. The molders of the Washington Iron Works gave 2nd Lieutenant Henry P. Ramsdell, Company C, an engraved sword, sash, and belt. The Ramsdell family owned the steamboats that carried passengers and

freight up and down the Hudson River. The ironworkers who purchased these items wrote in a letter to the young volunteer that they had the highest respect for his willingness to exchange his life of "refinement and luxury" for the rigors of the march and the danger of the battlefield. This feeling was due in no small measure to his "gentlemanly conduct towards us and to the fact that you seemed to take considerable interest in our business." They had hoped to make the presentation in Newburgh, where Ramsdell resided, but because of the demands placed upon him in Goshen they sent the sword and letter to him in camp. (*Newburgh Telegraph*, September 4, 1862)

On August 24, orders were received setting the 27th as the departure date for the regiment. With so much to do and so little time left before their loved ones departed, a feeling of urgency took hold of the county. However, it was soon learned that the federal government was not ready to arm the soldiers or to provide for their travel and accommodations, as so many other regiments were on the move at the same time. On top of that, the men had not received their advance pay. It was speculated that it would be at least a week after the 27th before the regiment would finally depart. (*Newburgh Telegraph* August 28, 1862)

Still, the general public was under the impression that the regiment would move out on the 27th, so together with the knowledge that there was to be a flag presentation on Tuesday, August 26, a sizeable portion of Orange County made its way to Goshen to be a part of this historic event. The village of Goshen awoke to a flood of visitors. "Somehow the impression had got abroad that a 'big time' was to be had in connection with a flag presentation, and at an early hour the people began to pour in to the astonished town… One can imagine what a time the residents had with such a crowd, and no provision made for their reception." (*Newburgh Telegraph*, August 28, 1862) Every hotel and inn with rooms to let was full before noon, and soon there was no more room in the village even for the horses and carriages used to bring so many wellwishers. The village swelled to several times its permanent population, some estimates running as high as 15,000 people. The presentation of a stand of colors to the regiment would be a solemn occasion indeed, and a great opportunity for Colonel Ellis to demonstrate how well his new recruits had been trained to observe military decorum.

At about three-thirty in the afternoon, the regiment was ordered out for dress parade, a formal exercise they would be required to perform just about every day of their military service. Each company marched out and took its place in line of battle; captains stood at the right of their respective companies, awaiting orders. At Ellis's command, each company wheeled to the right, forming a column of companies so they could pass in review for the crowd. Known for his martial bear-

ing, the colonel was every inch a soldier. Superbly mounted as always, he watched proudly as his men passed in review. "The troops deported themselves creditably, and their short stay at camp had transformed them into a fine looking body of soldiers, who will certainly do honor to the county from which they hail." (*Whig Press*, September 3, 1862)

With the regiment again drawn up in line of battle, the highlight of the afternoon took place. On a stand stood invited dignitaries awaiting Ellis's signal that he was prepared to receive the colors. First came the obligatory political bombast presented in the form of a patriotic speech by the Honorable Charles H. Winfield, who happened to be running for Congress. When he was done, Winfield handed the national flag to Colonel Ellis on behalf of the Daughters of Orange, a patriotic ladies group that had raised money for its purchase (as well as for a pair of guidons). At Ellis's request, the silk national flag had been made for "service and not for show." It would be carried at the center of the regiment by a color-bearer chosen for his bravery and soldierly demeanor. A color guard of handpicked men would protect the colors at all costs. The guidons were much smaller, silk-embroidered American flags that were carried at the left and right flanks of the regiment by sergeants chosen for the same qualities. With the colors at the center and the guidons on the flanks, the men could always align themselves, even under the most trying circumstances. (*Goshen Democrat*, August 28, 1862)

Ellis received the flag and dramatically held it aloft, saying, "Should the Flag this day presented by the people of loyal Orange, never be permitted to return, the brave boys marching under its broad folds will share its fate; for we have sworn to die rather than that it should be yielded to the enemies of our country!" (*Whig Press*, September 3, 1862) How prophetic these words turned out to be for the colonel himself and for so many others who stood in the ranks that day.

David F. Gedney, Esq., was next to speak, accepting the flag in the name of the Regiment. "His remarks were received with many demonstrations of gratification, and upon its conclusion the assemblage manifested its approbation by cheers and clapping of hands." (*Goshen Democrat*, August 28, 1862) Another newspaper described his speech as "eloquent" but of "some length." (*Whig Press*, September 3, 1862) Next, Miss Charlotte Coulter stepped forward, determined not to be overshadowed by any politician. She made a "grand little speech" and presented the guidons on behalf of the Daughters of Wawayanda.

With all eyes upon him, Colonel Ellis carried the national flag to the center of the regiment, and held it aloft while the men gave their new banner its first salute, "which was done in true Military order with the right hand raised." He then handed it over for safekeeping to Color Bearer Jonas G. Davis, "which was

the signal for a simultaneous outburst of enthusiasm upon the part of the whole Regiment, and all joined in six cheers and a "tiger"—three for the colors and three for the "Daughters of Orange and Wawayanda for the highly valued gift." Just at that moment, the Middletown Band struck up "The Star Spangled Banner." "The effect was electrical, and the dense mass of people present, seemed carried away by the enthusiasm of the moment." (*Goshen Democrat*. August 28, 1862) The official ceremonies completed, the regiment proudly marched and countermarched to show off its new banner, which "looked very beautiful as it gracefully floated to the breeze."

The total cost of the national colors and guidons was $130. The flag was made of the very best oil-boiled silk to regulation size. "The staff is surmounted with a silver spear, and decorated with a crimson cord and tassel. Upon the colors is the inscription, '124th Regiment, N.Y.S.V., American Guard.' On an engraved plate upon the staff is Written 'Presented to the American Guard, by the Daughters of Orange.'"

The company commanders were then ordered to take charge of their companies. Captain Ira Bush marched his men back to their barracks, where he drew them up in front of the building. Led by Eliza Knight and Maggie Heller, the ladies of Port Jervis (the home of Company F) had raised forty-five dollars to pay for a magnificent sword made by Tiffany and Company of New York. They presented it to Captain Bush in front of his men in a stirring ceremony. (*Whig Press*, September 3, 1862)

The festivities concluded, the officers and men were dismissed to visit with their families. Ellis seized the opportunity to make a quick trip home to New Windsor. There he found awaiting him a group of townspeople led by George Denniston, the town supervisor. In a brief and quiet ceremony, Ellis, too, was presented with a sword. (*Newburgh Telegraph*, September 4, 1862)

Thomas Rodman of Company C sat down to write his parents what he was sure would be his last letter from Camp Wickham. "I am well and in good spirits at present and I hope I may always be the same… This afternoon we have our Flag presented to us. Tell Father I am now acting as orderly Sergeant of my company as to what position I am permanently to hold I cannot say at present but am sure of an office. There is some talk of changing out our Captain. None of our Sergeants or Corporals are yet appointed." As it turned out, this bit of camp gossip was true: Captain James Cromwell, at that time serving as the commander of Rodman's company, had been promoted to major six days earlier and would be mustered at that rank the day before their departure from Goshen on September 5. (Phisterer, 3470) William Silliman, serving as adjutant, was promoted to captain of Company

C and was mustered on the same date. (Phisterer, 3475)

The daily routine of camp continued as the regiment awaited orders. Drummers woke the men at five in the morning; they were expected to wash and clean up their quarters in time for roll call at six. Close attention was paid to determine if anyone had deserted during the night. (At times during the war, the problem of desertion in the Army of the Potomac was so great that the roll was called twice a day.) The regiment drilled until seven, when the men were excused for breakfast until eight, after which they formed up for more drill. Dinner was served by Mr. Odell's workers at noon, followed by more drill. The men were called to dress parade at five, where orders were read, inspections were made, and other general military business was conducted. Upon dismissal, they were served a light supper and then were expected to return to their quarters until nine, when they retired. (Thomas Rodman, Goshen, Sept. 2, 1862) And so the routine went while the men and their families waited for the inevitable order to move.

Finally, on September 5, Captain William G. Edgerton arrived at Camp Wickham to muster the regiment into the service of the United States. That same day, a telegram was received setting Saturday, September 6, for departure, as their weapons were awaiting them in New York City. At last, it was time for them to leave behind their civilian pursuits and take up arms in the defense of the Union.

At one o'clock in the afternoon, the regiment was formed up "…and, without arms, but with banners flying and drums beating a lively tune; with knapsacks and haversacks swelled to their utmost capacity, with not only wearing apparel that would never be worn and food that would never be eaten, but with books to read, and keepsakes…we moved through throngs of weeping ones to the depot, where the last hand-shakings and final adieus were given; and at two P.M. the heavily laden train, with wild shrieks to warn away the clinging multitudes, moved off, and we were on our way to the seat of war." (Weygant, 31-32)