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## **Worcester County Soldiers in the Civil War**

**Pamela J. Cummings**

Union soldiers went to war in 1861 expecting a brief adventure: three months' service and a triumphant return home. They experienced four years of the most devastating war in American history. This paper will describe the way Worcester County soldiers reacted to their experiences during the Civil War. Before the end of 1862, Worcester County had sent four infantry regiments to the war, and many of the men recorded their experiences, indicating how they faced the most important event of the nineteenth-century.

In 1855, Worcester County had 150,000 residents and was growing rapidly. Most towns were rural communities of fewer than 3,000 people, while Worcester itself was considerably larger. About one-fifth of the residents were foreign-born, mostly Irish. By today's standards, it was a young population; almost half were under the age of twenty-one and less than one-quarter were over the age of forty. Worcester County was in the middle of a transition from a farm community to an industrialized area. Almost half the adult males worked as mechanics or factory operatives; only one-fifth were engaged in agricultural work. The county had paper, woolen, cotton, and saw mills, as well as

furniture factories, and the shoe- and boot-making industry was well-established.<sup>1</sup>

The men of the regiments raised in Worcester County (the 15th, 21st, 25th, and 36th) reflected the diversity of their communities.<sup>2</sup> While many recruits were under the age of twenty-one, the majority were in their twenties when they enlisted. A significant number, however, were over thirty, between one-fifth and one-quarter of the men in each regiment. In the 15th Regiment, almost one-third of the recruits were married when they enlisted, and just over one-quarter had been born in a foreign country. Their occupations mirrored the changing nature of their communities; more than half were mechanics, and only fifteen percent were farmers.<sup>3</sup>

The four Worcester regiments were organized during 1861 and 1862. Although each regiment served with the Army of the Potomac during the Wilderness Campaign, they took quite different directions in the first three years of the war. The 15th was the first Worcester regiment organized, and it served with the Army of the Potomac in every major battle through the summer of 1864. At the regiment's first battle, at Ball's Bluff, the 15th withdrew only after it was ordered to retreat. The regiment suffered heavy casualties when it was flanked on both sides at Antietam. At Gettysburg, with the 82nd New York, the 15th plugged a gap created when the Third Corps advanced off Cemetery Ridge. Flanked again, it withdrew and the next day met Pickett's charge. Of the 239 men engaged in the battle, over

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1. Abstract of the Census of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts . . . June, 1855 (Boston, 1857); "Worcester County Statistical Record and Military Roll of Honor . . . 1862," in the Worcester Historical Museum.

2. The 57th Massachusetts, formed in 1864, had a different war experience. Their story is told in Warren Wilkinson's Mother, May You Never See the Sights I Have Seen, (New York, 1990).

3. Records are from Andrew E. Ford, The Story of the Fifteenth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry (Clinton, Mass., 1898); J. Waldo Denny, Wearing the Blue in the Twenty-Fifth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry (Worcester, 1879); History of the Thirty-Sixth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers, By a Committee (Boston, 1870); Charles F. Walcott, History of the Twenty-First Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers (Boston, 1882).

half were killed, wounded, or captured. Less than a year later, at Cold Harbor, only seventy-five of the original men remained in the ranks. Later that summer most of the regiment was captured when their brigade was cut off. Those men who were not captured were mustered out to a big welcome in Worcester in July of 1864.

The 21st regiment left Worcester only a few weeks after the 15th, in August of 1861, but in December the 21st joined General Ambrose E. Burnside's expedition to North Carolina and participated in the capture of both Roanoke Island and New Berne, North Carolina. In August of 1862, it moved back near Washington to cover General John Pope's retreat from the second battle of Bull Run. The 21st suffered heavy casualties at the Fairfax Court House and Antietam before joining the attack on Marye's Heights, at Fredericksburg. In March of 1863, the regiment joined Burnside in the Department of the Ohio, but it returned to Virginia the next year for the Wilderness Campaign. By the time the 21st reached Petersburg, only 110 men remained, and when those not reenlisting went home in August, the surviving men were assigned to the 36th Massachusetts for the duration of the war.

The third regiment to leave Worcester was the 25th, and it too went south in early 1862, for Burnside's North Carolina campaign. After two years of relatively quiet duty, the 25th moved to Newport News in December of 1863. At Cold Harbor, the regiment suffered more than 200 casualties, out of 300 men engaged in the battle. In September of 1864, it returned to North Carolina for the rest of the war.

The last Worcester regiment, the 36th, left Massachusetts in September of 1862, but it was not heavily engaged in the East before transferring to Kentucky in February of 1863. After a few months of fighting guerrillas in Kentucky, the 36th joined General William T. Sherman's corps at Vicksburg, where the regiment suffered badly from disease and lack of food. By the time it returned to Kentucky that summer, the unit had dwindled to 368 men. The regiment remained in Kentucky and Tennessee through March of 1864, but then it too joined the Wilderness Campaign. After heavy fighting in each battle, only ninety men remained in the regiment while it held trenches around Petersburg

through the winter. In May of 1865, the 36th marched in the grand review in Washington before returning home.<sup>4</sup>

Worcester's soldiers were much like men throughout the North who served in the Eastern theater of the war. They enlisted expecting certain things from the army and from the Northern people. These things may seem basic to us, what every country owes its soldiers, but the men did not always get what they expected or what they deserved.<sup>5</sup> From the government and the army, soldiers expected competent commanders. When it became obvious that the war would not be a quick one, they looked for reasons why they could not easily defeat the army of the Confederacy, and they often concluded that poor leadership was the deciding factor. Private James Madison Stone summed up the situation before the second battle of Bull Run:

It is a mistake to think that the private soldiers are not, after a certain amount of experience, able to size up their commanders in a fairly correct way. If there is a master mind at the head, they know it very quickly, and it did not take the men of the 21st long to discover that there was no master mind at the head at that time.

After the battle of Fredericksburg, Stone wrote that "the men were not tired of fighting, but they were tired of being sent to the slaughter by incompetent generals."<sup>6</sup>

Sergeant Austin Stearns compared Northern generals to the highly successful Confederate General "Stonewall" Jackson. Stearns wished that his own leaders would take a lesson from

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4. Ford, Story of the Fifteenth Regiment, p. 15; regimental histories are in James L. Bowen, Massachusetts in the War: 1861-1865, (Springfield, 1889): for the 15th, see pp. 252-263, for the 21st, see pp. 327-345, for the 25th, see pp. 382-392, and for the 36th, see pp. 542-562.

5. Soldiers recorded their own thoughts and those of some of their comrades. No attempt is made to speculate on the thoughts of all of the Worcester County soldiers.

6. James Madison Stone, Personal Recollections of the Civil War (Boston, 1918), pp. 64 and 117-118.

Jackson and learn how to move the army quickly and then to strike hard. He believed that this kind of leadership raised morale and gave the men more courage. "Oh!" declared Stearns, "that we could have had a few such generals on our side in the first year of the war, generals that thought more of winning victories than they did of their nice cloths." But disappointment over leadership did not necessarily extend to the Union's Commander-in-Chief. When President Abraham Lincoln reviewed the troops after the battle of Antietam, Stearns remarked that he looked so careworn and troubled that

I thought I could detect a look of pity as he scan[n]ed our line. I think his coming down, or up, to see us done us all good, [and] that each soldier felt, after looking into his honest face, of doing his utmost to help lift the load that bore so heavy upon him. I know that I felt that way.

Sometimes soldiers showed remarkable insight when sizing up their generals. During the Peninsula Campaign in 1862, Sergeant Stearns was in northern Virginia, and although his regiment heard glowing reports about General George B. McClellan's progress, they realized that he had not yet defeated the Rebel army. When news spread that McClellan had retreated after coming within a few miles of Richmond, Stearns and his comrades were unimpressed by McClellan's claim that his withdrawal was in fact a Union victory. Stearns wrote that a "few more such victories and we could all go home with a Southern Confederacy fully established."<sup>7</sup> The men were not always good judges of their generals, however. Many in the 25th liked General Burnside, one writing that Burnside "looks [like] a man who knows what he's doing."<sup>8</sup>

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7. Austin C. Stearns, Three Years with Company K, ed. by Arthur A. Kent, (London, 1976), pp. 78, 93, and 135. Throughout the campaign, McClellan thought that the enemy outnumbered him, when his was really the larger army. He believed that his withdrawal from Richmond saved the army from annihilation.

8. D. L. Day, My Diary of Rambles with the 25th Volunteer Infantry (Milford, Mass., 1883), pp. 109-110.

Despite poor leadership early in the war, soldiers were willing to endure a great deal if they felt they were accomplishing something. After the battle of Chantilly, Private Stone summed up their feelings: "the worst thing about the whole matter was, we felt we had been sacrificed to no purpose." Soldiers also expected competence from their immediate superior officers. Early in the war, many regiments elected their own officers, only to have state officials replace them with political favorites when the regiments were mustered into United States service. This practice upset many soldiers. When Sergeant Stearns' company had its officers replaced, the men had a low opinion of two of the new officers. Stearns described one lieutenant as "a boy; boyish principles and boyish impulses governed all his acts," and Stearns believed that one-quarter of the enlisted men were more fit than the lieutenant to command. The captain, a Methodist minister, talked bravely but proved to be unsuited for command; he resigned three months later.<sup>9</sup>

In time, many Worcester officers resigned when they could not get along with their men. The colonel of the 21st left after the battle of Roanoke Island. He had received his military education in Italy and he had expected the same strict discipline as he had seen in Europe, but his men were not willing to endure such discipline. About a year later, a captain in the same regiment punished a man for a minor offense by having him strung up by the thumbs. That was the company's breaking point. The officer soon resigned when he realized that it would be dangerous to go into battle with angry men behind him.<sup>10</sup>

Soldiers appreciated good leadership and knew what they wanted in an officer. David Day praised the 25th regiment's major for leading and inspiring the men in battle, as well as for his leniency on the march, letting a sick or weary soldier ride his horse and looking the other way when the boys helped themselves to unauthorized foodstuffs. John Bassett, also of the 25th,

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9. Stone, Personal Recollections of the Civil War, pp. 37, 77, and 120; Stearns, Three Years with Company K, pp. 11-12.

10. Day, My Diary of Rambles with the 25th, p. 84; John E. Bassett Civil War Diary, September 15, 1862, in 1861-1864 volume, and pp. 21-23 in 1864-1865 volume, mss in Starke Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

recorded a ceremony in which upon his recovery from a wound, Company D presented their captain with a sword. The men praised their captain for being patient with them when they knew nothing of soldiering, and for courageously leading them in battle. When men of another regiment mourned the death of their colonel, one soldier lamented: "Never was there a regiment that felt the loss of a commander and brave man more than we. Our spirits were broken and discipline had taken its flight. We would have followed him wherever he would lead and share his fate[,] we both loved and feared him."<sup>11</sup> Soldiers prized good officers and hated incompetent ones. Unfortunately, even good officers could not always provide their men with all they needed.

The most basic provision was food. Yet, obtaining enough food was a daily struggle. Severe shortages occurred when the need was greatest, during long marches and combat, but even encampments around Washington sometimes suffered from insufficient food. Private Friewalden C. Thayer told his family that his company was on half rations because the cooks and officers were shortchanging them. Sergeant Stearns wrote that his colonel had caught a commissary issuing half rations of whiskey, when full rations had been ordered. Although cheating seems to have been quite common, under the best of circumstances feeding an army was a daunting task, and the supply network sometimes proved inadequate.<sup>12</sup>

Even when food arrived in sufficient quantity, its quality left much to be desired. Soldiers quickly discovered that army rations bore no resemblance to their mothers' or wives' cooking. Moses Smith wrote to his sister that while they were issued enough food, "it does not nourish us as the food that we get at home does." The meat issued was sometimes all but indigestible, and hardtack was not much better. Men of the 13th joked about their first encounter with hardtack. Some claimed it had been sent to Japan with Admiral Perry in 1854, for use as cannonballs, while

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11. Ibid.

12. Letter from Friewalden C. Thayer, December 29, 1862, in Military Collection, Misc. Records, 1860-1865, in Worcester Historical Museum; Stearns, Three Years with Company K, p. 214.

others said the boxes were marked B.C. 2400, for use on Noah's ark. The best description of the change in the men's eating habits, however, comes from a soldier's letter to his father in 1864.

I have thought what you used to tel me that i would see the time that i would be glad to eat what was set before me and it has come . . . if i should be lucky enough to get home i never will complain as long as i can get salt an potatoes.<sup>13</sup>

The availability and quality of food often depended on the importance that commanding officers gave it. For example, when Joseph Hooker took command of the Army of the Potomac in early 1863, he ordered vegetables twice a week and soft bread every day. Sergeant Stearns wrote that "The troops had confidence in 'Old Joe' and, with the change in rations, were in the best of spirits."<sup>14</sup>

In addition to expecting competent leadership and adequate food, veterans expected that the government would send new recruits who could be turned into reliable soldiers. But recruitment fell off so drastically that in the summer of 1863 the government was forced to institute the draft in order to bring in enough soldiers. Few men were actually drafted, as thousands of substitutes were paid to enlist to replace the men who had been called by the draft. These substitutes were generally not interested in becoming soldiers at all, and veterans saw few redeeming features in the new men. Sergeant Stearns' report on two hundred substitutes sent to his regiment demonstrates the uselessness of most of the men. At the first roll call, many could not remember the name under which they had enlisted. The substitutes were "desperate characters," the worst specimens of humanity." On their first march, many threw away their rifles

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13. Moses Smith Papers, 1859-1884, see March 31, 1863, ms in Worcester Historical Museum; Stearns, Three Years with Company K, p. 22; J. Taggart letter, June 20, 1864, in Military Collection, Misc. Records, 1860-1865, Worcester Historical Museum.

14. Stearns, Three Years with Company K, p. 156.

when they got tired, and then stole others from another regiment during the night. Stearns slept with his boots under his head and with his haversack and canteen looped around his neck, to prevent theft. In a few months, all but a few of the new men had deserted. The veterans probably felt relieved to be rid of them.<sup>15</sup> But they did not place all the blame on the government for the failure to provide decent replacements. They recognized that the people of the North were at fault as well.

What Union soldiers wanted most from the people of the North was their support. They needed to know that their sacrifices were appreciated. They needed respect. Early in the war, they clearly were appreciated and respected. Crowds cheered the regiments as they marched to the Worcester train station, people honored the men with banquets, and the ladies of Worcester presented each regiment with its flag. At their flag presentation ceremony, men of the 15th were told to think of their mothers, sisters, and wives when they looked at the flag, and to "let it witness to you that there are those to whom your welfare is dear."<sup>16</sup> Evidence of appreciation continued along the route to Washington. Soldiers of the 15th praised the people of Philadelphia for the abundant banquet served the regiment as it passed through the city. Such public support meant much to men who were going into combat. Sergeant Day summed up his feelings about the support he had received from Philadelphians, writing: "They are worth fighting for."<sup>17</sup>

Later in the war, however, when volunteering subsided, soldiers realized that enthusiasm was waning on the home front. The example of Lancaster, Massachusetts, shows how even an enthusiastic town could run out of volunteers. In April of 1861, Lancaster sprang into action and eventually sent almost ten percent of its citizens to the war. But as early as July of 1862, the town had to raise money for bounties, cash inducements to

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15. Stearns, Three Years with Company K, pp. 156, 214-218, and 228-230.

16. Ford, Story of the Fifteenth Regiment, p. 44.

17. Bowen, Massachusetts in the War, pp. 382-383; Day, My Diary of Rambles with the 25th, p. 10.

enlist, and two years later ten local men who had been drafted into the military hired substitutes to replace them.<sup>18</sup>

Some soldiers thought that wealthier and older men failed to support the army wholeheartedly. In June of 1863, Moses Smith wrote home that his younger brother should not join the army unless he was drafted, because Moses was already the family's representative and because there were many middle-aged men he wanted to see in the army before his own brother should enlist.<sup>19</sup>

As the war continued, soldiers also realized that the public perception of them had deteriorated. Returning home from a furlough in 1863, Sergeant Stearns tried to board an express train to Philadelphia and was informed that "Soldiers dont ride on that train." He got on anyway. A year later, he was on a train to Boston to be mustered out, when the conductor and several civilians ordered a soldier to throw away an unlit cigar. Stearns and several others rushed to the soldier's defense. When one of the civilians announced that he was the Attorney General of Massachusetts, the soldiers replied that they did not care who he was, and the conductor wisely backed down.<sup>20</sup> Incidents like these clearly convinced the soldiers that their status had declined, and they resented being treated poorly by the people for whom they had fought.

In addition to respect and appreciation, soldiers wanted to know they were not forgotten, that they were still a part of their families. Sergeant Day reported how happy the men of the 25th were when they returned from a march and found mail waiting for them. This raised their spirits more than anything else.<sup>21</sup> Men frequently berated their families for not writing enough or for not reporting all of the news from home. Families pressed for

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18. L. C. Nourse, "Soldiers of Lancaster in the Rebellion, 1861-65,"; and J. L. S. Thompson, Miscellaneous records of Lancaster town activities during the Civil War, pp. 1- 2 and 10, mss in Lancaster Public Library; Nourse, The Military Annals of Lancaster Massachusetts, 1740-1865, p. 302.

19. Moses Smith papers, Worcester Historical Museum, June, 1863.

20. Stearns, Three Years with Company K, pp. 244, 309-310.

21. Day, My Diary of Rambles with the 25th, p. 77.

details of their loved-ones' trials and offered what comfort they could through the mail. The men appreciated knowing that their mothers, sisters, or wives were remembering them in their prayers.



**Melville Walker of the 15th Mass. Infantry. Died of wounds received at the Battle of Antietam, September, 1862. Photograph from the collections of the Worcester Historical Museum.**

The desire of their families to learn about the soldiers' experiences left men in a quandary, for being informed about the unpleasant realities of war could only have brought anxiety to loved ones. Some men wrote of their hardships and then urged their families not to worry. A few months after entering the army, for example, Moses Smith informed his sister that a soldier's life was hard and that his weight had dropped from 160 to 135 pounds. Smith went on, however, to declare that his family should not worry about him. Another soldier went a little too far in assuring his family that there was no need to worry. Melville Walker, writing to his wife after the battle of Antietam, told her of a bullet lodged in his ankle, which left his foot swollen and painful. "I feel weak & faint but don't worry about me," he

concluded, "hope I shall come out all right so good bye & kisses for the children & yourself too."<sup>22</sup> A few days later, Walker died, probably from infection that accompanied the wound.

Although sometimes families could do little more to help their men than to pray for their safety, there was something Northerners could do to improve the living conditions of the soldiers. Food, clothing, and supplies from home were always welcomed by soldiers. Early in the war, towns sent supplies directly to their own soldiers. In 1861, the town of Lancaster gathered food, warm clothing, and hospital supplies, when informed that their soldiers were lacking these things, and packages were shipped to officers, for distribution to the Lancaster men. Later, however, the United States Sanitary Commission and other private organizations mobilized support for the soldiers. These later efforts were just as successful, but now, money and supplies went first to the Sanitary Commission for distribution.<sup>23</sup>

Packages from home were a tremendous boost to morale. In late 1862, Sergeant Stearns noted the envy his men felt when the Westboro company got a package from home. "How we boys that did not belong in Westboro wish[ed] we did when we heard their name called and saw them donning their warm things [that came in the package]." After the battle of Gettysburg, the people of York, Pennsylvania, sent twenty wagonloads of food for the wounded men. Such support was important to the soldiers; it was tangible proof that the Northern people were still thinking of them.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the efforts of the army and the people of the North to support the soldiers, both physically and spiritually, the men ultimately had to rely on themselves to sustain them through the war. Indeed, they became quite good at taking care of themselves. When neither the army nor the people of the North supplied

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22. Moses Smith papers, October, 16, 1862; and Melville Walker Letter, September 19, 1862, both mss in Military Collection, Misc. Records, 1860-1865, Worcester Historical Museum.

23. Thompson, *Miscellaneous records of Lancaster*, pp 1-8.

24. Stearns, *Three Years with Company K*, pp. 142-143 and 203.

sufficient food, soldiers solved the problem in their own way, by foraging. Sometimes foraging was done by a formal expedition sent to scour the countryside for food, as when Moses Smith's unit fought off Rebel attacks while bringing in two cows and eight pigs. More often, the soldiers foraged individually or in small groups, with each man providing part of the meal. The men ate as much as they could get, never knowing when the next meal would come. An extreme case was when Sergeant Stearns and a friend devoured eight pounds of beef in a single afternoon. Soldiers were always on the lookout for more food, no matter from whom it had to be taken. Men of the 25th discovered a plantation owner in North Carolina, a Union sympathizer, who claimed that he did not know how many pigs he owned; they targeted his uncounted swine for their own use, ignoring General Burnside's warning against seizures from Union supporters.<sup>25</sup>

Although some commanders encouraged foraging, soldiers often had to avoid detection by officers who tried to prevent such activity. Men from the 25th resented being restrained, while serving with a New York regiment. Sergeant Day remarked: "These officers in command here seem to think the proper way to conduct a war is not to hurt anyone or damage their property." Some soldiers ignored warnings from their officers; men of the 13th burned rails and stole hay only minutes after their colonel warned them not to do so. A few troops had the bravado of a soldier who, when brought with a chicken in hand before a general, replied "General, this rebellion has got to be crushed if it takes every hen in North Carolina." He got away with his prize and with a laugh from the general. There were limits to foraging, though. Soldiers of the 13th disapproved when some men raided the smokehouse of two old women who had shown kindness to the soldiers the night before.<sup>26</sup>

Soldiers spent a lot of time foraging, and their letters home were filled with stories of their efforts. They longed for the day

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25. Moses Smith Papers, December 7, 1862; Stearns, Three Years with Company K, p. 284; Day, My Diary of Rambles with the 25th, p. 57.

26. Day, My Diary of Rambles with the 25th, pp. 72-73 and 123; Stearns, Three Years with Company K, pp. 60-61, and 272.

when they could eat home-cooked food again. After two years in the army, Sergeant Day told his family that when he returned on furlough he wanted no salt pork, no beef soup, no rice, and no molasses.<sup>27</sup> Since salt pork was the staple of the military diet during the Civil War, it is likely that most soldiers never wanted to see salt pork again after their military service had ended.

Finding enough food was only one of the soldiers' problems; the struggle to maintain morale was another, and perhaps the most difficult problem of all. The recruits of 1861 rushed to enlist with enthusiasm and patriotism that is difficult to imagine today. Some of the men who joined the 25th Massachusetts believed "that actions, and not professions, stamp the character of the man, and . . . they could not remain at home while others fought the national battles for them." Other Worcester County recruits wanted to uphold family honor and tradition. George Murray and his three brothers enlisted in part because their father had fought in both the American Revolution and the War of 1812, and "Under those circumstances, I deemed it my duty to go, and follow the example of my predecessors." More was involved, however, than just honor and patriotism. Sergeant Day confessed that "a love of adventure" enticed him to enlist.<sup>28</sup>

Most soldiers who enlisted early in the war already knew many of their fellow soldiers from back home, but friendships became even closer as they faced long marches, privations, and battles. The unity that developed was important in maintaining morale. Men identified closely with their regiments and companies and were proud of their units' accomplishments, whether on the drill field or in battle. This feeling of pride could also extend to an entire corps. Private Stone reported that the 21st was glad to rejoin the 9th Corps in North Carolina, because "There was a fine, loyal and friendly spirit among our men . . .

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27. Day, My Diary of Rambles with the 25th, pp. 102-103.

28. Denny, Wearing the Blue in the Twenty-Fifth, p.9; George W. Murray, A History of George W. Murray (Northampton, Mass.), pp. 6- 7; Day, My Diary of Rambles with the 25th, p. 5.

we had learned to fight together, and confidence in, and respect for, each other was universal."<sup>29</sup>

The close attachments which developed between comrades in arms helped the men to endure numerous hardships. Soldiers often acted as surrogate families, to care for those who were unable to help themselves. A touching example was the case of Fordyce Horan, who, shortly before his enlistment expired in mid-1864, became erratically violent and, a friend wrote, "out of his mind, not exactly crazy, but something like it." After his arrest by the provost guard, friends visited him, made certain that he had enough food, and they wrote to Lancaster officials for help in getting him home. Despite their efforts, he disappeared into the army's bureaucracy, ending up in a mental hospital where he died, alone and almost unknown, in November of 1864.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the zeal which marked the beginning of the war, and the unity that the soldiers felt, nothing could prevent the eventual loss of enthusiasm. In December of 1862, five months after enlisting, Moses Smith assured his family, "my *Patriotism* is as good as ever and better." By the next June he was writing: "I hope the rebs will get cut to pieces this time i would like to see this war closed up. it is played out with me."<sup>31</sup>

When it came time for reenlistment, many of the men decided that they had sacrificed enough. While Private Murray reported that he and other men had become "fearless of the dangers," others decided that they had risked danger long enough, and that and it was someone else's turn. Some men, like Moses Smith, refused to reenlist because they were just "sick of war," and as Smith wrote, "the sooner I am done with it the better." It took some coaxing to convince some of the men to reenlist; for example, the promise of a one-month furlough helped many men

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29. Stone, Personal Recollections of the Civil War, p. 126.

30. Nourse, "Soldiers of Lancaster in the Rebellion."

31. Moses Smith papers, December 7, 1862 and June 22, 1863.

to make up their minds. Others simply felt the need to see the war through to its conclusion.<sup>32</sup>

Faith in God sustained many men while they waited for their time in the army to end. But there were never enough ministers to provide religious services for all who wanted them, and according to E. W. Locke, a traveling singer-songwriter, the army also suffered from a lack of good preachers. Sergeant Day probably would have agreed, for he found that some services seemed very remote from what he was experiencing, and that he could not maintain his interest in such services. Private Starke had to visit another regiment to attend a sermon. He believed that some of his officers were opposed to "godliness" and that they actually tried to discourage the men from attending religious services.<sup>33</sup>

Apart from formal services, many soldiers found strength in their own convictions. Edwin Bearse of the 40th Massachusetts told his mother that he was not afraid during battle because he trusted "in that Allwise Providence that does all things well . . . if I should die before the end," he wrote, "don't worry about me. I have no fear of it though. there is a time for all things." Moses Smith underwent a spiritual change during his years of military service. His announcement that he had "turned over a new leaf," and that he intended "to live a better life" prompted rejoicing in his sister's next letter. She had prayed for such a change in Moses and every night she had prayed for his safety. She assured him that "God can take care of you anywhere."<sup>34</sup>

At least one man faced the fact that the Rebels too were praying. Marching in 1862 through Culpepper, Virginia, Sergeant Stearns saw a local woman kneeling in prayer,

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32. Murray, "A History of George W. Murray", p. 13; Moses Smith papers, January 6, 1864; Day, My Diary of Rambles with the 25th, pp. 110-111; a majority of the men of the 21st and 25th regiments stayed, but few from the 15th did; Bowen, Massachusetts in the War, pp. 261-262, 341-342, 388.

33. E. W. Locke, Three Years in Camp and Hospital (Boston, 1870), pp. 203-205; Day, My Diary of Rambles with the 25th, pp. 11 and 28; Starke Collection, pp. 89-90.

34. Bearse Collection, February 24, 1864. ms in Massachusetts Historical Society; Moses Smith papers, May 25, 1864, June 1864.

with an expression on her face as though she was calling upon the Almighty to send down the most dreadful punishment it were possible upon our heads. I could not keep my eyes off from her as we passed, and a chill of horror ran through me as I looked upon her.<sup>35</sup>

Although Sergeant Stearns survived the war unscathed, he was not spared the horrors of battle.



The 25th Massachusetts Infantry and the 3rd New York Cavalry, at Grove Camp, Harrison House, Trent Road, New Berne, North Carolina. Photograph from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Military Division History Research and Museum.

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35. Stearns, Three Years with Company K, p. 86.

Sooner or later, most soldiers had to face their ultimate challenge — combat. Few knew what to expect at first, and they approached their first battle with varying responses. The men of the 15th looked forward to their first engagement, at Ball's Bluff. Private Greenwood reported that the men packed their knapsacks faster than ever, for "we were eager to be in an engagement." Despite the chaos which accompanied the Union retreat from that battle, the regiment gave a good account of itself. The 15th's colonel reported after the battle that the regiment's "spirit is entirely unbroken and its organization is in no way demoralized."<sup>36</sup>

David Day faced rebel gunfire for the first time at Roanoke Island. About the rebels he wrote: "I have no great desire to shoot the cusses, but still if they get in my way, and I think they ought to be shot, I suppose I shall do it." When he heard the order for men to load their rifles with ball cartridges, a "peculiar feeling such as I had never experienced came over me . . . and [I] thought I would rather be excused." Although the battle was a relatively minor affair, Day realized the horrors of combat. He did not have time to think about the men falling around him, but afterwards he "was filled with an indescribable horror and wanted to go right home. I now began to realize," Day wrote, "what we had been doing . . . ." Although Day grew more experienced in combat, he did not grow accustomed to it. After his second battle, at New Berne, he "certainly did not feel like glorying for who can compute the woe, anguish and sorrow of his day's work? I cannot get over my horror of a battle," he wrote.<sup>37</sup>

Soldiers felt varying emotions when going into battle. Some, like Sergeant Stearns, were calm. Arriving at Antietam the night before the battle, Stearns slumped to the ground and slept, oblivious to the army's movements around him. At other times, men were anything but calm. One private reported that when going into battle "I never heard so much cursing and swearing in my life." Private Stone looked back on his experiences and

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36. Diary of Harry Greenwood, pp. 1 and 10, ms in Clinton Historical Society; The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series One, V:312.

37. Day, My Diary of Rambles with the 25th, pp. 25, 33, 36, and 45.

realized that while he had been eager to see and shoot at a rebel in his first battle, he had no such desire in later encounters, "for my desire to see Johnnies was satisfied long before the war ended." Sometimes he felt little emotion at all and other times he was nervous. Some men simply could not stand the stress of combat. Sergeant Stearns saw a man at a field hospital at Fredericksburg who claimed that his foot had been almost completely torn off, but no one could find a scratch on him. He had been frightened by a shell exploding nearby.<sup>38</sup>

In the midst of battle, men could be oddly unaware of danger. Private Starke reported that in one battle he was oblivious to men falling around him, an experience Sergeant Stearns had at Antietam. But some men could not stop thinking of the danger they were in. For over a year a private of the 21st found excuses to stay back whenever his regiment made an attack, because he believed he would surely die if he were ever in combat. His shirking drew abuse from fellow soldiers, so finally he wrote farewell letters to his family and joined the regiment's attack at Fredericksburg. He was soon killed by a cannonball that struck him in the head.<sup>39</sup>

While approaching the front lines, many soldiers found it difficult to watch the bodies of dead and wounded men. Sergeant Day explained,

I know not how it is with others, but there is nothing that so completely takes the pith out of me when going into action as this. I want to get engaged before seeing the dead or wounded; after that I do not mind so much about it.

When Private Stone's regiment stopped near a field hospital at the second battle at Bull Run, he and other men were horrified by

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38. Stearns, Three Years with Company K, p. 125 and 147; Thayer letter, December 9, 1862, in Military Collection, Misc. Records, 1860-1865, Worcester Historical Museum; Stone, Personal Recollections of the Civil War, p. 35.

39. Starke Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society, pp. 1-3 and 29-30; Stearns, Three Years with Company K, p. 128; Stone, Personal Recollections of the Civil War, pp. 111-112.

what they saw. He wrote: "Every man in the company, I think, preferred to face bullets at the front and at short range, rather than stay back there . . . ." Worse than seeing wounded men before a battle, burying the dead was perhaps a soldier's grimmest task. After the battle at Fredericksburg, Stone's regiment was put on burial duty. It was "the most ghastly, the most shocking, the most humiliating scene possible . . . . Those days at Fredericksburg were among the most disheartening and most dreadful I have ever known," Stone wrote.<sup>40</sup> In the midst of combat, soldiers could block out their surroundings, but after the smoke cleared they could not ignore the horrible aftermath of battle. They remembered it for the rest of their lives.

There were many different ways for a soldier to leave his regiment and the war and to return home. Few men from the Worcester regiments chose desertion as their route home, but many men did depart before their enlistments expired. Both the 15th and the 25th regiments lost one-fifth of their men to death, about equal numbers from wounds and from disease. Even more men were discharged from service due to disabilities, leaving less than half of the 25th's men and less than one-third of the 15th's to muster out at the end of their service. Of the 200 men Lancaster sent to the war, 27 died of wounds, 23 died of disease, and 33 were wounded — a heavy burden for a small town.<sup>41</sup>

Worcester welcomed its returning veterans with open arms. Men of the 25th who returned in the fall of 1864 were treated to lunch at the train depot; they had to dissuade citizens from forming a parade (the men were tired and sick of marching). Crowds in Westboro greeted Company K of the 13th, and the 15th received a big ovation when it mustered out.<sup>42</sup>

Once at home, men had to face the future, profoundly changed by what they had experienced. Knowing they had lived

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40. Day, My Diary of Rambles with the 25th, p. 79; Stone, Personal Recollections of the Civil War, pp. 86 and 115-117.

41. Ford, Story of the Fifteenth Regiment; Denny, Wearing the Blue in the Twenty-Fifth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry; Nourse, (Soldiers of Lancaster).

42. Day, My Diary of Rambles with the 25th, p. 150; Stearns, Three Years with Company K, p. 308; Bowen, Massachusetts in the War, pp. 262-263.

through a major historical event, many published their recollections. But some men kept silent about their experiences for the rest of their lives. It will never be known how many men reacted like Cornelius Wilder, who joined Company A of the 15th Massachusetts in the summer of 1861. Wilder was in every major battle of the Army of the Potomac, but he was never wounded, and never sick. His 1902 obituary explained that after his return home he did not talk about his service; even his family knew only the bare details. The article summed up his experiences as "the service of a man who did his duty with quiet zeal, determined courage and persistent good nature and then said nothing about it."<sup>43</sup> In the years after the war, Worcester County was full of such courageous men.

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43. Fitchburg Daily, March 15, 1902, in Leominster Historical Society.