Glory

by Eric Kennedy

We are springing to the call
For three hundred thousand more,
Shouting the Battle Cry of Freedom!
And we'll fill the vacant ranks
Of our brothers gone before,
Shouting the Battle Cry of Freedom!

The Union forever!
Hurrah boys hurrah!
Down with the traitor, up with the star,
While we rally round the flag, boys
Rally once again
Shouting the Battle Cry of Freedom!

Walking through local cemeteries, one will find the gravesites for 17 brave souls who fought in the American Civil War with the 117th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment or "Fourth Oneida." The 117th New York was created in 1862 in response to President Lincoln's call to the northern states for 300,000 additional volunteer citizen-soldiers. At the time, the war was not going well for the Union.

Within Oneida County's Senatorial district, a committee was formed under Horatio Seymour, a Utica Democrat who soon would be elected governor of New York State, to oversee the recruitment of a new regiment from the county. Ironically, Governor Seymour became a very prominent and controversial national political figure as a harsh critic of the Lincoln Administration and its handling of the war.

One of the members of the committee was D.B. Goodwin of Waterville. The call for new volunteers went forward: "The State of New York, first in wealth, in population, and resources, should not be second in the alacrity with which her citizens meet the responsibilities resting on them. The time for indifference and inaction has passed, and every man, no matter what may be his position, must come to a prompt determination to devote himself to the cause of his country, or take the eternal disgrace of having turned a deaf ear to her call, at a time when her institutions are menaced with danger, perhaps, even with destruction."

Recruitment rallies were held all over Oneida County under the slogan "Rally Round the Flag." In August 1862, 1,024 men were mustered into the 117th New York Volunteers. Within its 10 companies, there were men and boys from Utica, Rome, Vernon, Camden, Verona, Vienna, Westmoreland, Bridgewater, Whitestown, New Hartford, Annsville, Oriskany, Trenton, Floyd, Steuben, Deerfield, Clayville, Paris, Kirkland, Boonville, Ava, Western, Remsen, Clinton, Augusta, Deansville (Deansboro), and Marshall.

Company "D" had 35 volunteers from Sangerfield. At home, they were farmers, clerks, harness makers, painters, mechanics, carpenters, laborers, shoemakers, moulders, and tailors. Of these 35, by war's end, one would die in combat, one would die in a Confederate prison (19 days after being captured), and two would die of illness (two-thirds of all Civil War deaths were due to illness/disease). A couple deserted. Some were wounded and some were promoted.

From August 1862 to March 1863, the regiment spent most of its time manning forts surrounding Washington, DC. The 117th New York then saw its first action during the largely-forgotten coastal campaigns off of Virginia and South Carolina. It's only combat casualty during this time period being one death suffered during the Siege of Battery Wagner. The initial assault by the 54th Massachusetts (a black regiment) on Battery Wagner was featured in the 1989 film *Glory*. The 117th New York would experience its own glory later at another Atlantic coastal fort near Wilmington, North Carolina.

While initial combat casualties were not high, many were dying from illness, disease, or "other causes" such as accidents. The boys from Oneida were not used to the more tropical southern coastal climate. By war's end, 137 soldiers within the regiment would die not by bullet, shell, or bayonet, but from ague (fever), typhus, sunstroke, unsanitary conditions and bad food, etc.

The nightmare of Civil War combat hit the 117th New York in full force once it was transferred to the Army of the James in May 1864. The Army of the James was cooperating with the Army of the Potomac during the sieges of Petersburg-Richmond – sieges that would last almost a year but ultimately end in the death of the Confederacy. The names of the battles that the 117th fought in near these two cities have largely faded with memory, but they should not be forgotten: Drewry's Bluff, Bermuda Hundred, Cold Harbor, the second assault on Petersburg, Chaffin's Farm, and Darbytown Road. At Chaffin's Farm, for example, the 117th New York suffered 124 combat casualties (15 dead, 9 mortally wounded, 67 wounded, and 33 missing). Private Edward E. Hitchcock of "C" Company (Hanover Cemetery) was killed in action there. Sergeant Andrew T. Rowell of "D" Company (Waterville Cemetery) was killed in action at Darbytown road. Private Charles W. Vibbard (Waterville Cemetery) was wounded at Petersburg and discharged. From May to October 1864, total combat casualties for the regiment reached 383 (59 dead, 42 mortally wounded, 233 wounded, and 49 missing).

But what's in a number? As Quartermaster Samuel Partridge of the 13th New York Infantry (Rochester) wrote home: "A fellow died last night in camp, only a private so nobody cares… In a few minutes that grey blanket and its enfolded corpse will be resting in a muddy hole… tomorrow everybody will have forgotten the man that was buried. But perhaps in some far off humble household anxious days and sleepless nights will be spent watching for the wanderer who will never return, and whom we, his fellow soldiers, his comrades, hard hearted wretches, calloused by many a similar scene, will never give a second thought. How little, very little, we think of the grief produced by war's calamities. For every man who falls in battle, someone mourns… for every soldier disabled, for everyone who loses an arm or a leg, or who is wounded, or who languishes in protracted suffering, or has 'only camp fever' - some heart bleeds, some tears are shed, bitter tears of which the world never knows. And every wounded soldier who returns to his family or friends brings a lasting pang with him."

By the end of 1864, Wilmington, North Carolina was the only seaport that remained open to Confederate blockade runners. Wilmington was crucial to the Confederacy as the entry point for imported munitions and supplies. Fort Fisher, which guarded the approaches to Wilmington's port, would have to be captured by the Union to isolate the South and expedite the end of the bloody war. Fort Fisher was the most imposing and formidable fortress in the Confederacy. But for the Union, the prize was too tempting, and the 117th New York was one of the units assigned to two Fort Fisher operations.

The first Fort Fisher expedition (December 1864) ended in failure under the questionable leadership of political-General Benjamin Butler. Butler prematurely decided to retreat when his plan to blow the fort out of existence by detonating a ship filled with gun powder near the ramparts caused no damage. General Ulysses S. Grant, then head of all Union armies, fired Butler and sent forth another expedition in January. Almost 9,000 soldiers, 59 warships, 21 transports, and numerous support craft were allocated to the operation.

The 117th New York was part of an all-New York brigade under Brigadier General Newton Martin Curtis. It would be Curtis' brigade and the 117th New York to lead the riverside attack on Fort Fisher on the afternoon of January 15, 1865.

Dr. James Mowris of the 117th New York recalls, "In the course of human events, we had again reached a time that 'tries men's souls.' It was traceable in the faces of those about us. One could read there the silent language of stern determination and resolve… It was an awful moment, and, while with compressed lips our troops were breathing a silent petition for home and country, the signal was given, and the line, despite the storm of bullets and canister which strewed the interval with dead and wounded, rushed forward like a tempest, through the stockade, and up the parapet."

Lieutenant Frank Lay of the 117th wrote to his wife in Westmoreland, "The order next came along the line was for the men to charge, when the General swung his hat, and not to fire until they reached the parapet of the fort. The hat is moved and we are off, every man running with all his might for the huge mound comprising the work. The very air seems darkened with death dealing missiles. I could feel the wind of the balls as they flew by… I was the fourth man to reach the work… The 117th was the first to gain the fort."

But the most brutal fighting was just beginning. Historian Rod Gragg writes, "Men fired their rifles point-blank into the faces of their opponents, then plunged into a brutal hand-to-hand fight – swinging rifles like clubs, grappling with each other, struggling, falling, wrestling in death grips with one another, killing up close any way they could… The living trampled on the dead and wounded, stumbling over the bodies…"

"The fight had but just commenced," wrote Lay his wife. "From three o'clock until nine at night the battle raged with a fury without precedent in the war. It was a hand to hand fight, from mound to mound went the colors of the 117th, in advance of everything else… Our regiment took more than twice its own number in prisoners. We had just reached the eighth mound, having taken 500 prisoners and 16 heavy guns. The men had used over 60 rounds of ammunition and were tired out completely when the order 'cease firing, they have surrendered' broke upon us."

Mowris also remembered the moment, "There was a calm – a welcome stillness – and then – a cheer – O! Such a cheer! It thrilled ones every nerve and reached the inmost soul, suffusing eyes unused to weep. Fort Fisher had fallen with her arms and garrison."

With many senior officers having been hit, Lay found himself in command of the regiment. "Men grasped each others hands and wept only as brave men can in the hour of victory. I was in command of the regiment and proceeded to get them together… but alas! Many had formed in line for the last time; ninety-three were killed and wounded."

Privates Charles H. Malone and John Whalan, both buried at St. Bernard's Cemetery, were wounded at Fort Fisher. Private George Selly (Sangerfield Cemetery) was severely wounded in the battle and lost his left arm.

The day after the battle, the 117th suffered additional casualties as the fort's main magazine accidentally blew up, killing and wounding approximately 200 Union soldiers. Soon the remnants of the 117th were on the move, marching into Wilmington with the rest of the Union army.

For the South, the fall of Fort Fisher spelled doom. "The fall of this fort was one of the greatest disasters which had befallen our Cause from the beginning of the war," wrote Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens.

The Confederacy's last doorway to the outside world was closed.

For further reading:

Confederate Goliath: The Battle of Fort Fisher, by Rod Gragg, updated edition 2006.

A History of the 117th Regiment, N.Y. Volunteers, by J.A. Mowris, M.D., published 1866.

Boys in Blue: From the Adirondack Foothills, by Howard Thomas, published 1960.

Mort Kunstler's 1992 painting, "The Gunner and the Colonel," depicts the assault of the 117th New York on the parapet of Fort Fisher. (www.mortkunstler.com)