

“A party of recruits joined me on the battlefield”
Portraying Company G, 5th NHV after Antietam

By Chris Benedetto

On October 31, 1862, as the Army of the Potomac and Army of Northern Virginia recovered from the bloody campaigns of the previous summer, Colonel Edward E. Cross penned his only annual report to Governor Nathaniel Berry of New Hampshire. In describing the harrowing experience of his regiment, Cross told Berry that “my men fought in the Battle of Antietam very ragged, more than forty of them without shoes, and I was compelled to equip thirty recruits from the bodies of the slain.” Since our Musterfield event this year falls on the exact dates which followed the battle of Antietam (September 18-19), there is unique opportunity for us to recreate this very well-documented episode in the history of the 5th New Hampshire. Musterfield is also a perfect site to serve as the Roulette Farm, near the Bloody Lane which their division invaded during the battle. Specifically, we will be portraying members of Company G (who were the color company) and the mustering of new recruits into that company which actually occurred on the Antietam battlefield. The rest of the weekend will be spent recreating some of the activities the company was involved in during the tense hours after the battle ended.

While Antietam is remembered today as the bloodiest day in American history, we must place ourselves in the minds of the New Hampshire soldiers who had no idea how long the battle would endure. After the intense fighting at the Bloody Lane, where the 5th NH prevented the Confederates from enfilading the Union left flank and then staved off a Rebel counterattack, it seemed very probable that heavy fighting would resume on September 18. And it did, to a certain extent; on the night of September 17, according to Thomas Livermore of Company K, “a portion of the regiment was sent out upon the skirmish line a little to the left of the cornfield and during the 18th kept up a fierce fire with the enemy’s skirmishers.” Colonel Cross also wrote in his own private journal on the same day, “My Reg’t was not withdrawn from the field, but furnished the picket & a large detail to bury the dead. A party of recruits joined me on the battlefield, the evening after the action. I had them marched to the field and equipped from the bodies of the slain.” Cross later commented in his annual report that his men “gathered up over four hundred rifles from the field,” actually Springfield muskets, some of which were likely issued to the recruits.

A careful examination of the regimental roster reveals the identities of many of these new soldiers, who were mustered into Federal service on the evening of September 17th or early the next morning. Considering that they had only enlisted a

month or so earlier, their arrival on a battlefield strewn with the bodies of thousands of dead and wounded men must have made quite a profound impression on these new soldiers. This episode was not without some sardonic humor; according to eyewitness Thomas Livermore, among the squad of recruits from New Hampshire was “a would-be lieutenant who wore an officer’s coat, but as he was disappointed in his hopes the colonel advised him to change it for a private’s. The colonel horrified some of this squad, I expect, by causing them to arm and accouter themselves from the slain who lay in front of our regiment.” According to the authors of *My Brave Boys*, the man who suffered this embarrassment was twenty-four year old Hilar Davis of Manchester, who organized the group of recruits and brought them down from New Hampshire, which he felt entitled him to be an officer. Davis had originally arranged to be a lieutenant in the 9th NH Regiment, but that never materialized and Colonel Cross’ order for Davis to throw on a sack coat must have been a rude awakening on the realities of Army life.

As the exhausted recruits attempted to sleep on the evening of September 18, 1862, many of these fresh volunteers must have been stunned by the carnage surrounding them. Even for the veteran soldiers of Company G, who had survived Fair Oaks, White Oak Swamp, and Malvern Hill, the fighting at Antietam was certainly the worst they had seen so far during the war. Nevertheless, Colonel Cross had great confidence in Company G, because Sergeant Lewis Fernald and Captain Janvrin Graves both remembered that the company was used as skirmishers as the regiment made its way across the Maryland countryside during the days leading up to September 17 (see pages 104 and 110 in the 5th NH Regimental History).

Seven of the new recruits were assigned to Company G, which had suffered severe casualties during the battle. From Livermore’s recollections, which are corroborated by Colonel Cross’ journal, “one shell or case shot which burst in the middle of G, the color company, and killed and wounded eight men and tore a great hole in one of our flags.” Within twenty-four hours of the battle, Colonel Cross recorded that a discharge of canister “tore the state colors of my Reg’t in two pieces.” It was this devastating explosion that likely wounded Samuel B. Little, 2nd Lieutenant of Company G, and Captain Charles Long, who soon resigned his commission in November 1862. Long had originally recruited most of the company from his hometown of Claremont, and in October 1861, the *National Eagle* claimed the men under his command already drilled “with the steadiness and precision of veterans.” 1st Lieutenant Daniel K. Cross, a cousin of the colonel who was promoted to that rank on August 1, 1862, likely remained in command of Company G during the days immediately following the battle. Paul Parvis will be portraying this brave officer.

The exploits of Corporal George Nettleton of Company G, who was wounded and later captured the blue state colors of the 4th North Carolina Volunteers, became legendary. Colonel Cross wrote that Nettleton displayed “great bravery & endurance.” To see what this flag looks like today at the Museum of North Carolina History, please click on the following link:

<http://collections.ncdcr.gov/dcr/ProficioScript.aspx?IDCFile=DETAILS.IDC,TITLE=Return%20to%20Museum%20of%20History,URL=http://www.ncmuseumofhistory.org,SPECIFIC=33118,DATABASE=WebTagSet634095401728092662>,

For those who own the entire *Echoes of Glory* series, the battle colors of the 4th North Carolina can be seen in the Confederate volume on page 242. To know that these flags were seen by the 5th NH at Antietam is about as vivid as history can get! On September 26, 1862, Cross wrote to Secretary of War Stanton, “I respectfully ask that the colors of the 4th North Carolina Regiment, captured...at the battle of Antietam be restored to my Reg’t that I may send them to the Governor of New Hampshire.” Cross apparently got his wish; the flag was not returned to North Carolina until 1914. Participants in the event will see a reproduction of this historic flag, which the New Hampshire soldiers surely took pride in capturing.

Uniform/Equipment/Portrayal Guidelines

While no one is expected to go barefoot at Musterfield, the statement by Colonel Cross that many of his men did so in 1862 is striking; at the very least we should try to look as ragged as we can. If you have an older piece of gear or brogans with broken soles, feel free to wear them. You’ll be that more authentic! We are portraying men on campaign that had not been issued new gear for a while, so the less you carry, the better. These were men on the march for two weeks before the battle and had just fought a severe action so our uniforms should be not look like they just got cleaned! Sack coats or frock coats and forage caps are a must, knapsacks or blanket rolls are encouraged, but please no 2nd Corps badges, since these were not issued to the men until the spring of 1863. At this time, the 5th NH was part of Richardson’s Division in Sumner’s Corps. However, if you have a brass infantry bugle, the letter “G”, or the silver plated “NHV” letters for your cap, you are encouraged to wear them because NH troops were issued these insignia with their caps. See the photo below of an unknown young New Hampshire recruit during the war:



Unlike most events, where we all represent veteran soldiers, at this event some individuals will be portraying brand new recruits who were new to the soldier's life. In this instance, it's ok to exploit this fact a bit; for example, a new soldier would be awkward initially with their musket or be unsure how to put on their equipment. Likewise, this is a chance for a veteran private or corporal to mentor and joke around with one of the recruits in their squad. This scenario gives us some interesting opportunities to have fun and instill some realistic qualities to our event.

When and Where?

All participants are asked to arrive at the "Roulette Farm" late Friday afternoon if possible since we will be doing a few activities (see the event itinerary). To avoid confusion, on Friday night each of the recruit's gear will be tagged with their name so they are issued to the right person the next day and there are no mix-ups. After being mustered into the Federal service on Saturday morning, the company clerk and quartermaster-sergeant will issue the new recruits gear/weapons which they will be told have been "taken from the dead on the battlefield." My plan is make sure everyone gets their own gear back while giving the appearance that they are being issued to them in an authentic fashion.

Ammunition

Participants are expected to bring a full box to the event since we are portraying the 5th NH during a combat scenario. In his journal, Colonel Cross noted that the night before

the battle his men were actually issue eighty rounds, but by the 18th and 19th, I'm sure that many of these had already been fired. If you need to make more cartridges, I strongly encourage anyone to purchase their "paper ladies" from N.J. Sekela (<http://www.njsekela.com/>). These are the best rounds I've seen in a long time and will save you a lot of time and trouble making your own from scratch. You can buy the basic set of 40 cartridges for under \$10, or if want to be a little more authentic, he also makes a "deluxe" set which come with a few "Williams Rounds" in blue paper (these contained special bore-cleaning bullets that were issued to troops beginning in 1862) and a few green cartridges which is how the percussion caps were issued to the soldiers with packages of ammunition. It may cost a few extra dollars but it's worth it!