

147th New York Volunteer Infantry
An Oswego Regiment

A Talk Presented by
Thomas J. Ebert

to the

Oswego County Historical Society
Town of Scriba Historical Society
Oswego Town Historical Society
Friends of Fort Ontario

August 17, 2011

In Upstate New York, new regiments were being raised in the summer of 1862. In Oswego County, the new regiment was to be the 110th New York Infantry but the response for enlistment was so great that a second regiment, soon designated the 147th Infantry was formed as well.

By the time the 147th regiment was mustered in on September 22 and 23, 1862, the nature of the Civil War had changed dramatically. In late summer 1862, General John Pope had marched his army to Manassas Junction where, on the last days of August, 1862 and for the second time, the Union army suffered a humiliating defeat at this place. Acting quickly, Lincoln reappointed George McClellan to run the Army of the Potomac. Despite having superior forces and the Confederate battle plans, McClellan managed a tactical draw with Lee's army at Antietam Creek. Lincoln

claimed a victory and on the first day the regiment was being mustered in, September 22, Lincoln issued his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Since no one realistically believed the South would agree to its terms, the war changed from one to preserve the Union into a war to preserve the Union while undermining the South's ability to wage war by ending slavery.

Few officers, except for George Harney, a former sergeant in the U. S. 7th Infantry who had been paroled to Fort Ontario after General Twiggs' surrender of the U S forces in Texas, had contemporary military experience. The regimental ranks were full of bright-eyed farm boys, and Irish and German immigrant laborers who had never ventured far from their extended families. The Germans were often referred to as "Dutch" an anglicized corruption of the German "Deutsch."

Sent first to Elmira, N. Y. to get fitted with uniforms and weapons, the regiment was sent to the defenses of Washington. Here this raw regiment was not given military training in the form of drill or weaponry but chiefly employed in fatigue duty. Eventually, they did receive rudimentary training in time for them to march with the army to the Battle of Fredericksburg. Fortunately for the regiment, it was held in reserve and

unlike their friends and family in the 24th New York, it was never sent into the meat grinder of those charges against Mayre's Heights.

But with the experience of Fredericksburg and then Burnside's useless Mud March, the officers got the hint that maybe they weren't cut out for the military life after all. The first regimental colonel, Andrew Warner was among the first to resign. The resignations started coming in. Henry H. Lyman would serve part of the war as regimental adjutant and after the war become the unofficial regimental historian. Of this time period, he wrote

Demoralization was evinced by the resignation of the colonel, four captains, and three lieutenants between January 25th and February 4th. Had the privilege been extended to enlisted men, the list would have been larger. This circumstance was an episode in the history of the regiment which caused considerable comment and criticism.

Lyman tried to protect the reputations of these men by continuing

These officers were, however, good citizens, brave men and as patriotic as those who remained; in fact had been selected and commissioned at the request of local war committees on account of their high moral and social standing at home, but

were mostly too old and wholly unfitted for military life and the trying ordeals of actual war.

By mid-1862, the lessons of war still had not taught the North, or for that matter, the South, that neither patriotism nor “high moral and social standing at home” was sufficient to make an effective officer. However, as older, unfit officers resigned, younger, unfit men left the regiment through death. Algernon S. Coe, regimental surgeon as well as Lyman noted the death from disease of forty-five enlisted men in the Spring of 1863. As farm boys and laborers from an essentially rural area, these men did not have immunity from the effects of typhoid fever and dysentery brought on by the extremely, overcrowded, unsanitary conditions of the camp.

By early summer, 1863, the regiment was marching with the Army of the Potomac through Maryland when it reached a place called Marsh Creek. There it spent the night of June 30, 1863. It was now part of the Second Brigade, General Lysander Cutler, First Division, General James Wadsworth, First Army Corps, General Abner Doubleday. The Second brigade consisted of the 7th Indiana, the 95th New York, the 76th New York, the 147th New York and the 56th Pennsylvania led by Colonel, later General, J. William Hoffman.

Early on the morning of July 1, the brigade was ordered to march quickly to the west of a little Pennsylvania town called Gettysburg to support the Union cavalry under John Buford. Henry Lyman tells the tale.

The next day the First corps marched to Marsh creek, about four miles from Gettysburg, and went into encampment.

Many things indicated that the army was on the eve of an impending battle. Batteries were put into position; a strong picket-line was posted, and the corps encamped in line of battle, as if in readiness to receive an attack. June 30 the regiment was mustered for pay. Early in the morning of July 1 the "long roll" was sounded. The first division was hastily got into marching order, and started on its way towards

Gettysburg. As it was crossing the summit of the divide, two or three miles from Gettysburg, overlooking the valley below, puffs of smoke could be seen from exploding shells, about two miles northwest of Gettysburg, but no report could be heard; the distance was not over two and a half miles. The advance of General Hill's corps was debouching from the mountain pass, and driving General Buford's cavalry before it.

The pace was quickened, and as the division approached within half a mile of the town it filed into the fields; it hastened on the double-quick to meet the enemy, the men loading their muskets as they marched. It hastily formed in a grove on Seminary Ridge, in the western outskirts of the town. It was led by General Reynolds in person to a parallel ridge four hundred yards distant, towards the advancing enemy. Through this ridge is a deep railroad cut. General Cutler's brigade was formed on this ridge, the cut dividing the brigade into two unequal parts. The One Hundred and Forty-seventh and Seventy-sixth New York Regiments were stationed to the right; the Fifty-sixth Pennsylvania, Ninety-fifth New York, and Seventh Indiana Regiments, to the left of the cut. The One Hundred and Forty-seventh Regiment's left rested on the cut; the Seventy-sixth joined the One Hundred and Forty-seventh on the right. The two other brigades of the First division formed the centre and left of the line of battle. Captain Hall's battery supported General Cutler's brigade, and was in position on the right of the railroad cut.

The principal force of the enemy was advancing on the Cashtown road against General Cutler's brigade, and the brunt of attack was directed to the right of the railroad cut. The battle opened about ten A.M. In front was a wheatfield, sloping down to a stream which sheltered the advance of the enemy. They suddenly poured a withering volley into the two regiments. General Reynolds was instantly killed. The enemy charged through the railroad cut, within sixty yards of Captain Hall's battery, and poured in a destructive fire, obliging it, with its supports, to withdraw. At the same time the enemy advanced in double lines of battle in front and on the right flank. - General Wadsworth directed this brigade to fall back. The Seventy-sixth Regiment received the order, and fell back in time, but the One Hundred and Forty-seventh Regiment did not receive the order to retire. Lieutenant-Colonel Miller was wounded on top of the head just at the time the order was delivered to him. Confused by the wound, he did not communicate the order to his successor, Major Harney.

Major Harney bravely held the regiment to its position, against overwhelming numbers, until Captain Ellsworth,

assistant adjutant-general on General Wadsworth's staff, seeing its perilous position, with great personal bravery hastened forward and ordered Major Harney to fall back; the enemy at the time held the railroad cut, partially intercepting the regiment's retreat. It was none too soon to save the regiment from total annihilation or capture. It had already lost full one-half of its numbers in killed and wounded. Major Harney, ever mindful of the good name and welfare of the regiment saw after the retreat that the colors were missing. Sergeant Hinchcliff, the color-bearer conspicuous for his bravery and fine soldierly bearing was shot through the heart, and had fallen upon the colors. Major Harney was about to return in person to bring them off, when Sergeant Wybourn, Company I, volunteered to rescue them. He returned, rolled Sergeant Hinchcliff off the colors, and bore them off triumphantly amidst a storm of bullets. He was wounded slightly, but was saved by his knapsack; the ball that hit him first passed through it. At this time General Meredith's brigade, occupying the centre of the line, was in great danger. The right wing had been driven back, and the enemy with a

large force held the railroad cut, ready to intercept the retreat of the remainder of the division. Upon the spur of the moment the Sixth Wisconsin, Fourteenth Brooklyn, and Ninety-fifth New York wheeled around perpendicularly to the line of the enemy and charged furiously upon them. They caught them in the railroad cut, and captured eleven hundred men, two battle-flags, and the rebel General Archer, and bore them safely off. This movement materially facilitated the retreat of the One Hundred and Forty-seventh New York. This manoeuvre severely repulsed the enemy, and the Federal lines were re-established. The One Hundred and Forty-seventh New York rallied under cover of Seminary Hill, but at no time during the remainder of the day could it muster more than seventy or eighty muskets. The battle had lasted about thirty minutes at the time of the failing back of the regiment. It returned near its former position after the line was re-established.

The 147th had endured its baptism of fire. But it was not on Reynolds avenue where the regiment's primary Gettysburg monument is located but rather at the McPherson farm on the next ridge to the west guarding the Hall's Second Maine Battery, a fact admitted to by the

historians at Gettysburg but despite promises given to the contrary as early as 1898, the monument will not be relocated to its proper position.

In a National Tribune article in 1884, General Hoffman the regimental colonel of the 56th Pennsylvania at Gettysburg debunked allegations that the 147th had been “cut off.” General Hoffman opened his comments by stating

The 147th New York has had a most singular experience at the hands of many writers who have written upon the operations on the 1st day of the battle of Gettysburg. Instead of being accredited with a full share of the honor won by the valor of the Union arms at Gettysburg, --- for the bravery, gallantry and self-devotion to duty of which they such a noble example on this occasion, --- the regiment has been made the recipient of the commiscration of many writers for having been, as alleged, “cut off” and held in captivity at a momentous period in the first onset of the battle, and thus held “until relieved” by the capture of a large part of the Confederate troops of Davis’ brigade, when, in fact, it was owing to the pertinacity of the 147th New York in holding on to their ground and their heroic fighting that kept this part of

the enemy's forces in check for a time, and thus enabled the other troops of Cutler's brigade to arrive upon the field and make the capture possible.

General Hoffman in the same article later goes on to state:

There can be no doubt, with these facts in view, that the 147th New York is entitled to a full share of the honors of capturing the enemy's troops in the railroad cut. It was the heroism displayed by the officers and men of the regiment in holding on to the ground, while suffering such terrible losses, that gave time for the regiments under Fowler to arrive and make the capture.

The statement that the 147th New York was "cut off" until "relieved" by the capture of the enemy's troops in the railroad cut was first published in one of the New York papers soon after the battle, and may possibly appear in some of the official reports. The statement did not harmonize with facts known to the writer...

It was Private Francis Pease who described a more personal experience at Gettysburg. Writing his family from Camp Parole at West Chester, Pa., Pease described the experience in more graphic and personal terms.

Describing the advance of the regiment to the support of the 2nd Maine

Battery, Pease wrote

Soon the rebel cannon balls began to whistle over our heads, some of them pretty close and probably the greatest battle of the rebellion was raging. Our batteries soon began to return the fire and as we came up in a little hollow we were ordered to lay down. The rebel batteries were firing away, but the balls flew over our heads and we could see them strike in the distance and plow up the turf and scatter the dust. We were soon ordered to march by the right flank and were soon in twenty or thirty rods of the rebels whose colors were flying. We were then ordered to get down upon one knee and then the order came to fire and volley after volley was sent into the ranks of the Johnnies. The rebel bullets whistled about our heads like hail. The men were falling thick and fast around us, some dead, others wounded. Corporal Franklin Halsey, of Mexico, stood right by my side to the left. He was hit by a ball in the head and killed instantly. For fifteen or twenty minutes we fought hard, when the rebels flanked us on the right, advancing upon us in large numbers. The firing from both sides was very rapid.

Finally we got the order to retreat and we lost no time in leaving, an awful sight of dead and wounded upon the field. As we retreated we got into a railroad cut or ravine. We were moving as fast as we could, which was not very fast, because the ravine was crowded and there were a good many wounded men that had to be helped along. After we got into the cut the rebel bullets whistled over our heads. Soon the Johnnies were upon both sides of us, standing upon the banks in large numbers, and we were compelled to throw down our arms and surrender.

Among Private Pease's comrades at Camp Parole was another private, Michael Kelly of whom we shall talk later. The rebel regiments who attacked the position of the 147th that morning were the 2d and 42d Mississippi, and 55th North Carolina. Shortly after capturing Private Pease, these regiments would find themselves cut up in the railroad cut.

As the fighting dragged on into the afternoon, Surgeon Algernon Coe was in the town nursing the wounded of the 147th and 14th Brooklyn in the hotel across the street from the rail station. While Coe was away tending to an officer in another building the men broke into the hotel's liquor store. When the Confederates entered the town shots rang out from

the upper floor of the hospital. In an 1885 letter to the National Tribune, Coe described the scene upon his return to the hospital.

As I approached the hospital I found a line of about a dozen of the 14th Brooklyn men formed across the entrance, disputing possession of the building with about 20 rebels, who had their muskets to their shoulders about to shoot them down. I took in the situation at once, and called out sharply to them not to fire, as they were wounded men. The rebel officer in command of the squad thereupon ordered his men not to fire, and turned to me and said: "Doctor, have your men disarmed or I will have them shot." I ordered the men to give up their arms and return into the hospital; all but four or five did so, and they were so crazed by liquor that they were wholly regardless of their fate. By dint of entreaty to the enemy, and personal effort in getting their arms away from them, I succeeded in saving all but one, who was shot through the heart. Just as I had succeeded in disarming the Brooklyn men I saw a mounted rebel officer on the opposite side of the street brandishing a pistol and declaring that he was going to have the hospital sacked, because his men had been fired at out of its windows. He

about the same time spied me, and came riding across the street to show me the trophies that he had that day captured from the “d-d Yankees.”

The opportunity afforded to satisfy his vanity in boasting of his exploits seemed to take the place of desire of wreaking his vengeance on the hospital, and he soon quietly rode off without putting his threat into execution. Upon going into the hospital, I found the cause of the disturbance. It seems that these Brooklyn men were looking out the windows with their muskets in their hands when the enemy entered the town, and they discharged their guns out of the windows. The enemy returned a volley through the windows knocking the plastering off the walls over the bar opposite. The Brooklyn men then marched down and formed across the entrance, where I found them upon my return. All of them had been more or less severely wounded in the earlier part of the day. After the disturbance was quieted, I found the Brooklyn men and the rebels, who a short time before were so anxious to shoot them, seated side by side on the curbstone, laughing at and joking each other as the best of friends. They seemed to

be well acquainted, and had often met each other on the picket line and had a friendly game of cards or traded coffee for tobacco. Coffee was a rare luxury to the rebels in those days.

Back on the battlefield, the work of the regiment was not done. On July 1, the remnants of the regiment were reformed on Seminary ridge and later that day driven through the town with the rest of the Union army. Again reformed on Cemetery Ridge, the regiment was sent to Culp's Hill. There, under protest of General Wadsworth, the 147th and 14th Brooklyn were sent to the extreme right in support of Greene's Twelfth Corps on Culp's Hill where they participated in the fighting on July 2 and 3. There, according to Henry Pfanz in his three volume history of the battle, those two regiments won the distinction of being the only regiments, in either army, to participate in fighting on all three days of Gettysburg. Much of the fighting on Culp's Hill was done at night with muzzle flashes providing the only light for either army.

David J. Dickson or Dickinson, a lieutenant of the 56th Pennsylvania at the time of the battle, wrote the National Tribune in 1915 to memorialize the fighting on that hill done by the 147th and 14th Brooklyn. Dickson cites the report of General Greene of the 12th Corps in

demonstrating that Greene's 12th Corps did not hold Culp's Hill by itself when he writes

This evidence from official sources is submitted to correct the erroneous impression that Greene's Brigade defended Culp's Hill alone of the night of July 2, 1863, and also to give due credit to those regiments which aided Gen. Greene. Cutler's brigade seems to have been lost sight of entirely, and yet it sustained the assault of Jones's Virginia Brigade and repulsed it without any help...

Davis continues

Greene's Brigade gallantly performed its whole duty, but we must not rob Peter to pay Paul, and while we accord all proper commendation to the brigade, which so bravely defended its position, let us not withhold due credit from Cutler's Brigade, which not only held its line unassisted, but helped Greene to hold his. "Honor to whom the honor is due."

William Fox in history for the New York State Monuments Commission also confirms the heroism of the 147th and the importance of their work on Culp's Hill.

"The service of the One Hundred and Forty-Seventh on this line has never been officially recognized in the reports of officers of the corps (Twelfth) and as the commanding officer of the One Hundred and Forty-seventh failed to make any official report, that important event in its career has never been mentioned by historians or writers of the battle, except in General Slocum's speech at the reunion of Green's Brigade on Culp's Hill on July 2d, 1893. The prompt reinforcement of Green's weak and attenuated lines at by the One Hundred and Forty-seventh New York and Fourteenth Brooklyn, and their vigorous and unflinching attack on the advancing enemy, whose strength and movements were only revealed by the tongues of flame which leaped from the muzzles of their guns, undoubtedly frustrated Lee's plan... "

The importance of the fight on Culp's Hill is often overlooked by historians who prefer to concentrate on the action of Sickles' men in the wheat field or Chamberlain's 20th Maine on Little Round Top while ignoring the intense fighting at the top of the fish hook. Hand to hand

fighting illuminated only by the discharge of weapons is just as deadly and certainly more harrowing than a bayonet charge in the light of day.

On July 1, the regiment entered the battle with 380 officers and men. When it was over, 301 men had been killed, wounded, captured or were missing. The Lt. Col. Miller would survive his head wound to be wounded again at the Wilderness. He was soon to be the regimental colonel. Major Harney was presented a sword by his men for his gallantry and ultimately promoted to Lt. Col.

After Gettysburg, no major battle was fought between the armies in the Virginia theatre until the spring of 1864, only occasional engagements, sparring between two lumbering, wounded armies.

In the intervening months, the ranks of the 147th New York were filled by men from all over Central New York from Buffalo in Erie County to the west to Herkimer County in the Mohawk Valley. No longer was the regiment a truly Oswego regiment. Nor was the regiment composed solely of volunteers as the first Union draftees were among the new soldiers.

The reconstituted One hundred and forty-seventh New York now became part of the Fifth Corps under General Gouverneur Warren. In early May, 1864 it was with the Army of the Potomac as it marched south past old familiar ground near the Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville

battlefields. There in the thickets of the Wilderness, the regiment again met the enemy in battle.

Joel Baker, who would later become Oswego's first police chief had been promoted second lieutenant two days before the battle. He wrote the following account in his diary, which would be published in the Oswego papers after his death.

May 3, 1864 Today I was promoted to the rank of 2d lieutenant, 147th N.Y.S. vols. There are strong indications that a movement of the army of the Potomac is not far distant.

May 4: My prediction is fulfilled. We commenced moving at 12 midnight marching to Germania Ford on the Rapidan river which we cross at 11 a.m. without opposition from the enemy and march about four miles toward the rebel front where we encamp for the night, sleeping on our arms so as to be in readiness for the first crack of the muskets, for that a great battle is near is plainly to be seen. This evening, James Whaley, a brave and handsome young Irishman who enlisted in the regular army from Seneca Hill, came to see me, as he said, for the last time. He was killed in the battle following.

May 5: Formed in a line of battle and commenced to advance at 5 a.m. marching toward Mine Run. Heavy and continual skirmishing in our front. We are marching through a dense forest. We meet the enemy in Indian warfare (for every man knows enough to take a tree.) The rebels flank us and we are forced to retreat but the fight as we go. Our colonel did bravely here but it was his last fight for I see him fall and the brave Colonel Harney assumes command of the regiment. From 11 o'clock a.m. until 4 p.m. it is nothing but one continual battle. The forest is so thick with that it is impossible to retreat in order and we become separated. About fifteen of us get together and attempt to find our way back to the main line but we discover we are completely surrounded by the enemy. Turn which way we see a rebel musket stick out from behind a tree, and hear it crack and the whiz of the bullet as it goes on its errand of death. Plainly we must do something if we expect to free ourselves from the predicament that we are in. We resolve to make one desperate effort to break through their lines and we do so with the loss of only

one man and finally joined our regiment somewhere near where we started in the morning.

So ends the first day's fight in the wilderness and nothing is accomplished.

Colonel Miller would be found on the battlefield barely alive. He would recover from his wounds as a Southern prisoner. During his capture he was imprisoned in a house in Charleston, South Carolina in range of the Union naval bombardment. Paroled in December 1864, he would return to Oswego a hero who had been mourned in formal memorial services and then, as if resurrected, returned to his family and friends. Before he returned to his regiment, he received a commemorative sword from the grateful people of Oswego.

Adjutant Lyman would be captured, his sword taken by a Confederate colonel from Georgia who whispered his demand for Lyman's valuables, lest they fall into the hands of his men. On May 5, 1877, a package was delivered to Adjutant Lyman from F. S. Johnson of Macon, Ga. returning his sword and other valuables taken on that day thirteen years before. They became life-long friends and made visits to each other.

At the Wilderness, Sidney Cooke received a wound to the back of the neck but miraculously it did little damage and the doctors decided it

was better to leave the unoffending bullet alone rather than risk an operation. Years later, Sidney Cooke had a violent sneezing episode and out came the bullet.

Private Michael Kelly's luck didn't get any better. Captured with many of his comrades at the Wilderness, this time he was not paroled but sent to Andersonville. Fearing for his life at Andersonville, he decided to enlist in the Tenth Tennessee Infantry, Confederate States of America. His luck only got worse. In December, 1864 he was again captured, this time by federal forces and was imprisoned at the federal prison at Alton, Illinois. There he languished wondering if a rope or a firing squad would be his fate. But Fate finally smiled upon poor Michael when on the morning of Lincoln's assassination, he agreed to sign a loyalty oath and take one year's enlistment in the Fifth U. S. Infantry in Kansas. Michael served his time in the Fifth U. S. Infantry and was discharged in October 1866.

Although like most Union units, the 147th had its share of desertions, I did not find a single instance where a man was executed for desertion. This was certainly not the case where I found men from the 81st being executed as late as the end of March 1865 for attempts to desert to the enemy.

After the Wilderness, another regimental soldier from the Mexico, New York would disappear from the face of the earth. He was eventually declared to be dead, thought to have been killed at the Wilderness perhaps burned beyond recognition. He had regularly sent his pay along with letters to his wife. Now, his bride of barely two weeks when he left for the front in September of 1862, thought herself a widow. Having not concerned herself with the sanctity of marriage while her husband was away at war, she now went about choosing a new mate from among her lovers. Settling upon another local boy, she petitioned the government to declare her husband officially dead and send her the money owed to her late husband in back pay and to her in pension money. She intended to use it for the grand wedding she never got the first time around. Having no information to the contrary and with the concurrence of the Army of the Potomac, the government obliged. The Provost Marshall was dispatched to Mexico to pay the young widow. When the Provost Marshall got off the stage in Mexico the young widow and her intended were there to greet him. As the Provost Marshall got off the stage, so did her late husband. It seems that he was not dead after all but was now a paroled prisoner of war. Husband to be number 2 quickly considered the laws against bigamy and the probable marksmanship skills of a Union army veteran and vanished from the scene.

The wife was not contrite about her lack of fidelity but instead demanded the money brought by the Provost Marshall stating that since the government had declared her husband dead, he was dead regardless of the evidence standing before them. The Provost Marshall disagreed. The young soldier arranged with the Provost Marshall that the money be used to hire a divorce attorney and then he departed to Richmond to join the regiment for the Appomattox campaign.

In the past, after a great battle, one side rested while the other side retreated. Not so now anymore. There would be no respite. Wilderness was followed by Spotsylvania Courthouse, by North Anna, Cold Harbor and finally the bungled attempt to take Petersburg in June, 1864. Defeat didn't matter to Grant. He knew Lee could not sustain a war of attrition and Lee had already told Jefferson Davis that once Grant crossed the James, the fall of Richmond, and the Confederacy, was only a matter of time.

The regiment was engaged in all these battles but reports are sparse because like other union regiments, the officer corps was getting killed, wounded or captured. The fact is that for all intents and purposes the Overland Campaign was a continuous engagement for the six weeks from May 5 to June 19. There was no time to write reports.

Captain George Hugunin would write to the National Tribune in 1890

I was a poor infantry officer, who packed my valise at Culpepper, May 3, 1864 and never saw it again until June 6, wearing the same shirt over 30 days, when I rinsed it once and put it on wet. Our brigade (Second, Cutler's Division) had no rest in that time, under fire or marching day and night. My fatigue coat was torn off in the brush at Wilderness, and so were my pants.

After the Overland Campaign, Grant commenced the siege of Petersburg with his railroads, the gate to the Confederate capital. Grant's strategy at Petersburg as it had been in the Overland campaign was to push to the left, seizing the railroads leading into Petersburg, stretching Lee's lines further west, and first enveloping and then seizing Petersburg and Richmond.

Four railroads entered Petersburg providing needed supplies to the Confederate capital. Two of them The Petersburg and City Point Railroad and the Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad had quickly fallen into Union hands. Grant push westward to capture the remaining two railroads, the Weldon Round Railroad and the Southern Railroad. In late June, 1864, an

unsuccessful attempt was made on the Weldon Railroad which connected Petersburg to North Carolina and its still functioning port of Wilmington.

in a letter in the National Tribune dated April 15, 1888, Grove H. Dutton, a sergeant in Co. D from Fulton, N.Y. described the action against this railroad starting on August 18, 1864 from a noncom's perspective

The Weldon Railroad was very important to the Confederates and defended with great obstinacy. By it nearly all the supplies for the army at Richmond and Petersburg were transferred. Two or more attempts had been made to capture it, but without success. On the night of August 17, 1864, we received marching orders. Rations were issued, cartridges boxes replenished, and at 2:30 on the morning of the 18th we fell in and were soon on the move, marching quite a detour to escape the observation of the enemy. At the same time a feint was made by the Second Corps to attract their attention elsewhere. At about 2 o'clock our skirmishers encountered the enemy near the railroad in the vicinity of Yellow Tavern, about eight miles from Richmond. We there massed in an open field, and were opened upon by a rebel battery with but

little damage, as most of their shells went over. In short time we were marched across the railroad about half a mile and halted. Our brigade, (Second of the Third Division, Col. Hofmann) was temporarily attached to the Second Division (Ayres's). It had commenced raining. The skirmishing in our front was getting pretty lively, when Col. Dailey, of division staff, rode up and asked for volunteers to go out as videts. About 59 men stepped out and were put in command of Capt. Pierce, of the 147th N.Y. We were deployed and marched in advance of the pickets, firing as we went, until we were in close proximity to the rebels, who blazed away at us to the best of their ability. Our orders, after being halted, were to keep up continuous fire, in order that our main body could establish a line a short distance back. Capt. Pierce and others were wounded here. When we came back to the main body after being relieved, we found that the boys had thrown up breastworks. It was raining steadily, and that night we lay in the muddy pits, partially filled with water, under orders not to take off our accouterments, and be ready for an attack at any moment. In the morning we discovered that our artillery had

been posted in rear of us about a quarter of a mile. In capturing the road there had been an interval between the right of our corps and the left of the rest of the army, occupied by a picket-line. The rebels discovered this and, forcing their way through, captured almost 2,000 prisoners and swung around threatening our right; but at this moment the troops of Wilcox and White, of the Ninth Corps, made their appearance, and the rebels retreated. While this was going on we were repelling a charge in our front. Our artillery opened on the enemy, but owing to faulty ammunition the shells burst in the rear of us and at every discharge was dealing death in our own ranks instead of harming the enemy. Serg't McGraw of my regiment, was killed, and a number of our brigade suffered also. That night we moved back a short distance and threw up works, though we had no idea that we would have a chance to fight behind them, but the next morning soon after daylight our pickets were driven in and the rebels made their appearance in two lines of battle. Night after night during that terrible Summer we had built works only to leave them the next morning, and we had despaired of ever fighting behind

them; but here our hopes were to be realized. As I cast my eyes down our line I thought it was the most glorious sight I had ever witnessed --- our flags floating to the breeze and our boys standing in the pits ready to meet the enemy. They advanced in splendid order and we soon opened on them apparently without effect, though our artillery mowed them down like grass. They advanced to within a rod or so of the works before they turned. Many of us followed them and quite a number of prisoners were captured. To the left of us there as a space between two brigades which was not occupied, and through here they swarmed, and a rebel officer grasped the colors of a regiment here, but was shot before he could get away with them. After a short hand to hand conflict they retreated. The charge was repeated in a short time, but we were too many for them and they met with grief, leaving many of their dead on the field

In a letter dated August 23, 1864, now Lt. Col. George Harney writes Major Dudley Fahrline about the state of the regiment after the Weldon Railroad affair. The letter reads

Your letter of the 20th inst. is received. We are getting rather lonesome now. Our numbers are decreasing rapidly. We have but a few officers present. Sickness as well as the bullets of the enemy are telling upon us. Capts. McKinlock and Hubbard, Lieuts. Lawlor, Wyborn, and Kingsley, are sick in hospital. Capts. Pierce and Hugunin were wounded in a skirmish on the 18th inst. So you see I have met quite a loss in officers within a short time.

After securing the Weldon Railroad, the regiment supported the efforts to push further to left. It played a small role in the battle at Ream's Station but otherwise mended its wounds and replenished its ranks.

By this time in the war, the Union army was not interested in bringing newly recruited regiments to the front. The Union army decided that only the veterans should do the fighting now.

So how did the army refresh regiments that were diminishing in numbers by the day?

As noted, the regiment had received an infusion of new men after Gettysburg, but these were raw recruits. Now, the regiment received an infusion of veterans. The term of the 76th New York Infantry by whose side the 147th had fought in many engagements was now at the end of its

enlistment. At the end of December 1864, many of the regiment's veterans went home. But a number of veterans from Fredericksburg and Gettysburg reenlisted to see the war to its end. There were the others who had been enlisted or drafted in the summer of 1863 whose terms were not up. All these men became members of the veteran 147th New York.

Unlike the 147th, the 76th Infantry has a regimental history. It was written by Abram P. Smith. Mr. Smith does not end the history of the regiment in December 1864 but continues it as if the men of the 147th had joined the 76th rather than the other way around. This history provides a very good general account of the last months of the 147th.

The first battle this combined regiment engaged in was at Hatcher's Run in February 6, 1865. Having now secured three of the four railroads leading into Petersburg, the fourth and last railroad, known as the Southside Railroad, now became Grant's goal. The fall of the Southside Railroad would mean the fall of Richmond, and the demolition of the rebellion in Virginia. Smith takes up the history of the regiment at Hatcher's Run.

About one o'clock P.M. the next day, the Third Division of the Fifth Corps, including the One Hundred and Forty-Seventh New York, was ordered to the front. Crossing the Run they

ascended the hills on the west side, and as they were descending the opposite slope they suddenly came upon the enemy. Almost the entire surface of the country was covered with dense growth of pine. Marching through this, upon the road to Dabney Mills, the Division came upon a clearing of some ten or fifteen acres. Here they found the enemy in force. The fight soon commenced with great fury, but it was of short duration, when the rebels retreated. Our Division retreated across the open field at the double-quick. The rebels kept up a running fire, until five o'clock, when they made a most determined assault all along the line, evidently with the intent of breaking through the line, cutting off and capturing the Division. At the same time an attack was made in front, and the left being out of ammunition, the left fell back on the center. Soon after, the right fell back also, being hotly pursued by the enemy. In a short time, the whole line fell back in disorder, until they reached the breastworks erected by the Third Division the day before. Here they were rallied, and pouring a heavy volley into the rebel ranks, and brought them to a sudden halt. The wagons and artillery were on their way back when the

retreat commenced, but had got fast in a swamp, and though great efforts were made by the ordnance officer of the Division to save them, they were obliged to abandon two.

The enemy shortly made an attack on the Second Corps, near the Armstrong Road, but were repulsed. The loss in this engagement was quite severe, falling mostly on the Fifth Corps. General Morrow, commanding our Brigade, was severely wounded in the shoulder.

Captain Coey, commanding the One Hundred and Forty-seventh Regiment, was shot in the nose, the ball coming out at the ear...

The weather was so intensely cold that whenever the clothing became wet it froze to the men, and many who fell in battle froze to death before they could be removed from the field.

By the end of the fighting on the evening of the seventh, the Union lines had been advanced another five miles.

Nearly thirty years after the battle on May 12, 1892, Major James Coey would receive the Medal of Honor for his service at Hatcher's Run. The citation notes that he

Seized the regimental colors at a critical moment and by a prompt advance on the enemy caused the entire brigade to follow him; and, after being himself severely wounded, he caused himself to be lifted into the saddle and a second time rallied the line in an attempt to check the enemy.

In 1903, Walter F. Beyer and O. F. Keydel published the book entitled:

Deeds of Valor in which James Coey's action was described in detail:

The Third Brigade, Third Division of the Fifth Army Corps, to which Major James Coey's command, the One hundred and forty-seventh New York Infantry, was attached, advanced over an open field, under a heavy fire from the enemy, who were entrenched in a wood. The brigade commander, General Henry A. Morrow, placed himself in front of his command and implored the line to move forward, but the effect of the enemy's fire had been so appalling that the men hesitated. The situation was most critical because the brigade adjoining Morrow on this right was sorely pressed and its line in danger; General Crawford, the division commander, was urging Morrow's advance, hoping to draw the fire from the right

front and relieve the pressure there, but the line was terror-stricken. It was at the moment that Major Coey, who had, by word and action, been seconding General Morrow's efforts to advance the line and hold it to its duty, seized the colors of his regiment and advanced with them. The effect was magical! Color after color was taken until the entire brigade line was on its feet and with a cheer advanced into the woods to within a few rods of the enemy's work, Here its farther advance was stopped by a wide and deep ditch filled with water.

Major Coey communicated the situation to General Morrow, now in the rear of the line, who, seeing the fast thinning ranks of his command, and the hopelessness of advancing, ordered the line back to the edge of the wood, there to entrench. The major then called the attention of the brigade commander to the lack of ammunition, hardly five rounds to a man being left, whereupon General Morrow ordered the brigade to meet any advance of the enemy with the bayonet and go on entrenching. Coey immediately ordered the men to obtain cartridges from the dead and wounded lying along his front, and to make obstructions to retard the

enemy's advance by bending and intertwining young saplings. In this work, he was setting his men an example, when the Confederates, now reinforced with artillery, opened a fierce and destructive fire, and made a spirited advance on the front and flank, driving the Union line back.

At this juncture, Major Coey was severely wounded --- a bullet entering below the left eye and passing out behind the right ear --- and was being borne from the field in the arms of two comrades when consciousness returned. Immediately he procured a horse from an ambulance sergeant, and being lifted into the saddle and held there by two of his men he turned to the line, and, rallying it, for the second time made a heroic attempt to check the advance of the enemy.

Coey was the only member of the regiment to receive the Medal of Honor for his bravery during the war. He joined a sailor from the Kersarge who earned his honor in the fight that sank the Alabama and surgeon Dr. Mary Walker as Medal of Honor winners from Oswego county. After the war, he relocated to California, became active in veterans affairs including the MOLLUS Commandery of California, and served a term as the Postmaster

of San Francisco. Dying in 1918, he rests honorably in the San Francisco National Cemetery.

After Hatcher's Run, Captain John McKinlock wrote Mr. F. Vanvillez of the death of his son Charles. It is an eloquent letter transmitting the officer's pain at the death of this soldier.

It is with most painful feelings that I am under the necessity of transmitting to you the heart rending intelligence of the death of your son who was killed on the 6th instant, while gallantly urging his men to follow him in a charge made by our forces upon the works of the enemy at Hatcher's Run. He was wounded in two places, the first taking effect in the right side, passing through the body and coming out in the region of the heart; the second striking back of the left ear and passing out of the mouth. Every effort was made to secure his body, but in vain. Our forces were so hotly pursued that all attempts to recover it proved futile.

We would have gladly forwarded his remains to Oswego that you might have had the consolation of gazing once

more upon the features so dear to you, even if they were cold in death, but circumstances would not permit.

I know not that anything I can say will give consolation to you who so dearly loved the departed one, but may God in His infinite mercy give you fortitude to bear up under this painful affliction. It is the will of Him who holdeth all our lives in His * hand, and to His will we bow.

Another home has been made desolate by the loss of a dear member, but alas, how many thousands homes have been made desolate by the loss of fathers, sons, and brothers, who have given their lives for the preservation, of our once happy Union. Your son has fallen. He has given his life a sacrifice for the country. He has died the death of a hero. May the knowledge that he has ever nobly performed his duty as a true soldier serve as a balm to your bleeding hearts. Ever foremost in strife, giving words of encouragement to those around him, he had endeared himself to all by whom he was surrounded, and his loss is deeply mourned, but he will never be

forgotten—the remembrance of those gallant heroes will never decay.

The historical records of this unholy rebellion will transmit from generation to generation the praises of those ones who have so freely laid their lives upon the altar, secure for that which our ancestors fought to win.

I have not the privilege of writing more. Look to God for consolation.

The family of Charles Vanvillez held a memorial service and mourned his passing and sought to carry on with that permanent hole in the fabric of their lives. Yet, two months later, Charles Vanvillez appeared in his parents' parlor, not as a specter but as living flesh, not dead after all but a prisoner of war. These sudden reappearances of individuals thought dead would give unrequited hope to a generation of parents, spouses, children that their loved one too, was not after all dead, but merely missing.

After Hatcher's Run, the Army of the Potomac now rested. The regiment bereft of officers was placed in the command of Col. J. B. Daily from General Crawford's staff. The lull lasted through late March.

Robert Spencer, husband of the regiment's angel of mercy, Elmina Spencer, wrote on March 29 days after the failed Confederate attack on Fort Stedman. Sent from City Point and published in the Oswego papers on April 3 he wrote

The following communication is contraband for publication to day but before it reaches Oswego will be published in all the city papers.

This morning Gen. Grant with his staff left the Point to join General Meade and to establish their headquarters at Dinwiddie Court House to-night. The 2d, 5th, and 6th corps moved at 3 o'clock this morning with General Sheridan and his 15,000 cavalry to the west to extend our leftwing indefinitely. Gen. Sherman has been here with President Lincoln. They have had a council of braves, not around a fire, as of old, but amid the fumes of good Havana cigars, General Grant, Sherman, Sheridan and Meade with the rail splitter. The 24 A. C. has crossed the Appomattox and joined the 9th Corps in the defence of our lines around Petersburg, while the 25 A. C. hold the lines of our right around Richmond. Our troops have taken 14 days rations and 60 rounds of ammunition. The news may be old

when you receive it, but you may imagine how exciting it is to us today. We trust the rebels will find the last ditch before the week closes. May it be the Slouth of Despond¹ to them.

R. H. S. [Robert H. Spencer]

Abram Smith gave a detailed account of the contending armies in the battles of White Oak Road or Gravelly Run on March 31, and Five Forks on the first of April. The battles were intense with the lines moving “to and fro”. Rebel prisoners and colors falling to the Union regiments. Intense fighting but amazingly low casualties for the regiment. In these fights, the unlucky George Pickett lost a second division.

Like so many battles the regiment was in, there is no report from the regimental commander. Events moved too fast after the 30th of March for writing. It was an abbreviated Overland Campaign, but troop movements spread across the region. What reports were written by the commanders of the division and corps became bound up in the controversy over the justice of Warren’s removal by Sheridan shedding more light on the details of conversations than accounts of troop movements.

Lee and the Confederate government left Richmond in the late hours of April 2. Petersburg surrendered on the morning of the third, while the

¹ Slouth of despond is a literary reference from John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Here it is a wish that the confederates will experience a general condition of hopelessness and gloom.

81st regiment from Oswego, at the head of the 24th Corps marched into Richmond at about eight o'clock that morning, the first Union infantry regiment to enter the rebel capital. The 147th had no time to reflect on these momentous events. It headed off in the pursuit of Lee.

Grant prohibited celebrations among the Union forces after Lee's surrender but no such restraints would be tolerated by the people of Oswego. The news reached the city around 10 o'clock in the morning on April 10. The telegrapher rushed the news to City Hall where the bells began to ring out the news. Soon all the church bells in the city rang the joyous news all day. Spontaneous celebrations broke out throughout the city and harbor where ships were decorated with pennants and large national flags. The soldiers from the fort brought their cannon down to the end of east Mohawk street next to the river and following instructions from the Secretary of War shot off a salute of two hundred rounds. Fireworks over the harbor concluded a day of delirious joy. Peace would soon come and the men would be coming home.

The return of the regiment to Oswego was delayed by the Grand Review on May 23. Joshua Chamberlain would write a description of the grand march, praising the services of the old First Corps and of the Fifth Corps that absorbed the old First Corps. George Harney and Henry Lyman

joined the regiment for the Grand Review recently released from their accommodations in Libby Prison. Finally, it came time to discharge the veterans and transfer remnants of the regiment to the 91st New York. On June 7, 1865, the One Hundred and Forty-seventh passed into history.

But their story was not yet over. The men had a journey to make. Home to their families. Their train was late to Syracuse and a few men didn't wait to get paid before they darted for home. The others waited. Finally, they headed for Oswego.

The local citizens prepared a feast and the mayor prepared a welcoming speech. The local paper described the homecoming on June 17, 1865, two years, eight months and twenty-six days after 837 men had left Oswego for Elmira. Now, 137 returned. Not all 700 were dead. Many had been maimed rendering them unable to serve. Others had been transferred to the Veteran's Reserve Corps or other regiments, or to the navy given Oswego's maritime industry.

But many had sacrificed their lives. Some lay in the National Cemetery at Gettysburg where burials are arranged by state. Others were buried in the Fredericksburg – Spotsylvania National Cemetery. Some lay unburied at the Wilderness fragments of bones and ashes among the burnt thickets of that horrible battleground. Seventy-one were buried at

Andersonville, Georgia and Salisbury, North Carolina. Others were buried in anonymous graves throughout Virginia or on the grassy hills of Mr. Lee's mansion at Arlington Heights. Some slept at home in St. Paul's or Riverside cemetery segregated by religion but not by their sacrifice. Like the end of all wars, there would be happy reunions and empty chairs.

The Oswego papers give a wonderful description of the celebration on the day of their return:

The veterans, about one hundred, were met at the depot by a detachment of the 49th under by Col. Beckwith, proceeded by the Oswego Mechanic's Sax Horn Band, and, amid the waving of flags, the salute of cannon, blazing of rockets, and the cheers of the people, were led through the streets directly to the Armory, and were at once introduced into the hall. Here they were received with the singing of patriotic songs of welcome by the ladies, the waving of handkerchiefs, the clapping of hands, and rounds of enthusiastic cheers.

At the end of the hall a number of flags were displayed, among them the old regimental flag of the 147th, which had been sent home. An officer, seizing this, held it up in full view of the men. The sight of the old flag, riddled with bullets, and torn to

shreds, which the regiment had followed through so many dangers, and had protected through so many hard fought battles, and under which so many of their brave companions had yielded upon their lives for their country, was greeted with rounds of prolonged and deafening cheers.

The account goes on

It had been arranged that Hon. D. O. Burt should welcome the soldiers home with a short address, but the disarrangement occasioned by the delay at Syracuse and the anxiety of the veterans to greet their friends made an address impracticable.

I would normally end the account of the regiment here but in my research I found a most amazing letter written years after the war which bears remembering on this occasion. It was written by a widow of a member of the regiment after one of the local papers forgot to mention the 147th while waxing about the glorious history of the other Civil War regiments from Oswego. The letter reads:

In a late issue of the *Times* was an article upon the mustering out of the 48th regiment incorporated in which was the remark that the two regiments that gained renown in the war was the 24th and 81st, and giving the number of the original members

of the 81st that were mustered out on its return. It sounds as if it was written by a person connected with that paper. Now, undoubtedly, there would have been a much larger number of *original* members mustered out if there had not been so many of their officers resigned after their first fight at "Fair Oaks." I wish you would look over the records that must be around somewhere, and see if you cannot find that there was a regiment went out from here called the 147th composed of nothing but Dutch, Irish, French, Canadians and Americans; not very flowery to be sure --- but flowers of our families merely. We think they went out in 1862, September --- but what became of them, I would like to know. It was a good while ago, but it seems I remember reading that they were nearly annihilated at Gettysburgh; filled up, 33 percent of their number stayed in the Wilderness and around Petersburg; filled again and --- well they had no friends when they went out and their being the offscouring of creation, all they were fit for was to fight and die. Not a man returned to tell the tale, except those who returned after the mud march. Were they a reality? --- or are we, the widows and orphans of those we have been proud to

call, members of the 147th N. Y. volunteers deceived and they a myth? If they were a reality and any of them came back, or had they any friends, I am sure we would have heard of them sometime. Now, Mr. Editor, look up the records and satisfy a large number of us widows or orphans of that regiment.

There was a rumor came floating around in 1865, and was pretty well believed by us that on the dead body of a soldier at Appomattox was found a paper which read as nearly as I can remember, as follows:

"I am the last man of the 147th New York Volunteers. The one who finds this please forward to our native home, Oswego, Oswego county, New York, so that they may know we did our duty. Fearing I may not survive the coming engagement, I herewith give a list of the principal engagements our regiment were in. Saying nothing of the skirmishing and reconnoitering: Burnside's Mud March, Second Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Mine Run, Kelley's Ford, five days in the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, North Anna, Bethesda Church, Beaver Dam, Cold Harbor, Petersburg, Weldon Railroad, Hatcher's Run, Chapin's Farm, (here several were so

blurred by blood as to be indistinguishable), Five Forks,

Appomattox."

Yours truly,

Oswego, Jan. 29. '82. WIDOW

In 1865, there was no thought the old regiment would be forgotten. I close with an editorial piece which appeared on June 20, 1865 in the *Oswego Daily Palladium*, a copperhead paper for most of the war, as a fitting tribute to the men of the One Hundred and Forty-seventh.

Oswego County has sent many fine regiments to the field during the late rebellion and all of them have bright records to show, the 24th 81st, 110th, 147th 184th besides others partly raised in this County, are to us sources of pride and faithful history will preserve forever the memory of their noble deeds To-day we welcome to their homes the survivors of the glorious 147th Regiment. To-day the popular heart is stirred to its depths by mingled feelings of gratitude, joy and sorrow. Gratitude to the brave men who have thus periled their lives in the high places of field, that the blessings which the fathers bequeathed to us, and made perpetual, and which the foul hand of treason sought to destroy. Joy, that the cause for which their blood

soaked so many battle-fields has, under the Providence of God, gloriously triumphed, and sorrow for the brave men whose bones whiten on Southern battlefields. Sorrow for the bleeding hearts of the widow and fatherless who will to-day look in vain through the varied ranks of the survivors for the loved one who pressed them to his heart as he left his home and all that was dear to him, to fight for his country.

After recounting once again the battle history of the regiment, the editor proclaims

Well may we honor the survivors of this glorious record, and the people of Oswego County will never forget to honor, not only the gallant handful of men, who have returned unscathed from this carnival of blood, not only the many brave fellows who have come to their homes maimed for life, and whose smitten bodies are monuments of patriotism, but the memory of the sacred dead shall be preserved forever, and their kindred shall hear their names spoken with reverence and honor by a grateful people.

To this I say, "Amen" and thank you.