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"The Regiment Bore a Conspicuous Part": A Brief History of the Eight Ohio Volunteer Infantry, Gibraltar Brigade, Army of the Potomac

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Abstract

On April 10, 1850, a sixteen year-old from Xenia, Ohio named Samuel Sexton copied a stanza of Epes Sargent's poem, "A Life on the Ocean Wave," into his notebook:

A life on the ocean wave! A home on the rolling deep!

Where the scattered waters rave, and the winds their revels keep!

Like an eagle caged I pine, on this dull unchanging shore.

Oh give me the flashing brine! The spray and the tempest roar!

Before his death in New York City, July 11, 1896, Sexton would serve as the Assistant Surgeon of the Eighth Ohio Volunteers, his entire service in the field so strenuous that he was obliged to rest after the second year of combat. Arduously contending with the wounds and emotions of the wounded and dying from Romney to Winchester, Fredericksburg to the Peninsula, and South Mountain to Antietam, Sexton acquired an emotional connection to the regiment. This would generate a lifelong correspondence with Lt. Col. Franklin Sawyer, who would command the unit from May 1862 and pen its regimental history. The Civil War would metamorphose Sexton's mundane Ohio shore, the "flashing brine" of the trials of the Eighth his vessel.

Keywords

Eighth Ohio Volunteers, Civil War, infantry

“THE REGIMENT BORE A CONSPICUOUS PART”¹:
**A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE EIGHT OHIO VOLUNTEER INFANTRY,
GIBRALTAR BRIGADE, ARMY OF THE POTOMAC**



BRIAN MATTHEW JORDAN

On April 10, 1850, a sixteen year-old from Xenia, Ohio named Samuel Sexton copied a stanza of Epes Sargent’s poem, “A Life on the Ocean Wave,” into his notebook:

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Before his death in New York City, July 11, 1896, Sexton would serve as the Assistant Surgeon of the Eighth Ohio Volunteers, his entire service in the field so strenuous that he was obliged to rest after the second year of combat.³ Arduously contending with the wounds and emotions of the wounded and dying from Romney to Winchester, Fredericksburg to the Peninsula, and South Mountain to Antietam, Sexton acquired an emotional connection to the regiment. This would generate a lifelong correspondence with Lt. Col. Franklin Sawyer, who would command the unit from May 1862 and pen its regimental history.⁴ The Civil War would metamorphose Sexton’s mundane Ohio shore, the “flashing brine” of the trials of the Eighth his vessel.

The trials of the American nation had begun much earlier; exactly one week after Sexton reproduced Sargent’s work, Vice-President Fillmore excoriated Missouri Senator Thomas Benton on the floor of the Senate as the debates which would eventually frame the Compromise of 1850 heated. The compromise would include the Fugitive Slave Act. This legislation was greeted with a Northern acerbity that only increased the intensity of sectional strife. The tortuous litany of key events to follow—the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Bleeding Kansas, *Dred Scott*,

¹ Whitelaw Reid, *Ohio in the War: Her Statesmen, Generals and Soldiers*, vol. 2, *The History of Her Regiments and other Military Organizations* (Cincinnati: Moore, Wiltach & Baldwin, 1868), 68. The author wishes to acknowledge the advice and support of Dr. Allen Carl Guelzo, friend and mentor. This work is dedicated to Samuel Sexton and his comrades in the “Bloody Eighth,” and, of course, to Allison.

² Samuel Sexton, loose notebook page, 10 April 1850, Samuel Sexton Papers, MSS 185, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio.

³ MOLLUS Memorial Circular for Samuel Sexton, November 10, 1896, in Sexton Papers, MSS 185, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio.

⁴ See Franklin Sawyer, *A Military History of the 8th Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry: Its Battles, Marches, and Army Movements* (Cleveland: Fairbanks and Company, 1881), reprinted as Franklin Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteer Infantry: Gibraltar Brigade Army of the Potomac* (Huntington, West Virginia: Blue Acorn Press, 2005). In addition to this regimental history and other Sawyer articles and speeches cited within this paper, Sawyer published a six page history of the regiment in the *Firelands Pioneer*, vol. XII (Norwalk, Ohio: Norwalk Historical Society, 1876), 77-83. This abstract of the more formal *Military History of the 8th* was proffered by Sawyer for the Norwalk Historical Society, which since 1858 had been coalescing articles of local interest into a historical journal.

the fraudulent Lecompton Constitution, and John Brown's raid—would for the South be sealed by the election of Lincoln in 1860. This apparent loss for slaveholders in the balance of power led South Carolina to take the lead in forming the Confederacy.

On the morning of April 12, 1861, a bloodless bombardment at Ft. Sumter in Charleston Harbor effectively marked the commencement of hostilities. Three days later, President Lincoln called for 75,000 militiamen to respond to the rebellion; Ohio demonstrated no timidity in responding to Lincoln's supplication. Between April 18 and April 29, 1861, inspirational meetings were held and companies from across northern Ohio were coalesced into a regiment for three months of service.⁵ "On the twenty-third, a rousing Union meeting was held at Medina village," wrote Lorenzo Vanderhoef, Company K. "I am now a Soldier! The United States now claims my services. Who would have thought, two months ago, that Lorenzo Vanderhoef would ever be a volunteer soldier[?] But such is the fact. The actions of the people in the Southern portion of our Republic was of such a nature as to endanger the existence of our present form of government."⁶

On May 2, the regiment was transported to Camp Dennison near Columbus for organizational purposes and the mundane, yet necessary drills.⁷ As these activities transformed the enlistees into men, Vanderhoef's comrades shared his sentiments. Indeed, when it became apparent that the "three months men" would be sent to the cynosure of war and orders mandated the reorganization of the regiment into a three year unit, many continued their service. On July 24, 1861, the Eighth was sworn in for three years service under Col. Herman S. DePuy.⁸ Only Company I was absent, to be reorganized before rejoining the unit in western Virginia that September. Companies D and B were selected as the skirmishers of the regiment and were ordered with their Enfields to occupy the left and right, respectively. The remaining companies were issued smoothbores.⁹

Drill and discipline continued until the regiment was "loaded into boxcars" to participate in McClellan's initial campaigns in western Virginia.¹⁰ McClellan had been urged by Ohio Governor Dennison to cross into western Virginia, support the Unionists, and prevent the Rebel seizure of rail communication lines. Though initially sluggish, McClellan drove the enemy back from Philippi; subsequently, Brig. Gen. William Rosecrans attacked and affected the withdrawal of the Confederates on Rich Mountain July 11, making Confederate Gen. Robert S. Garnett's position on Laurel Mountain indefensible. Garnett retreated, stumbling into a delaying action at Corrick's Ford, where he became the first general added to the casualty rolls

⁵ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteer Infantry*, 9-11; Thomas Francis Galwey, *The Valiant Hours: A Narrative of "Captain Brevet," an Irish American in the Army of the Potomac*, Col. Wilbur S. Nye, ed. (Harrisburg: Stackpole Books, 1961), 1-2; Whitelaw Reid, *Ohio in the War*, 2:66.

⁶ Lorenzo Vanderhoef, diary, April 27, 1861, in Kenneth R. Martin and Ralph Linwood Snow, eds., "I am now a soldier!" *The Civil War Diaries of Lorenzo Vanderhoef* (Bath, Maine: Patten Free Library, 1990).

⁷ Reid, *Ohio in the War*, 2: 66; *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, May 10, 1861.

⁸ DePuy would lead the Eighth Ohio until he resigned for reasons of health effective December 15, 1861. He was replaced by Col. Samuel S. Carroll, who would lead the regiment until his ascendancy to brigade command as of May 24, 1862. It was at this point that Franklin Sawyer assumed the command that would span the remainder of the war. Compiled Service Records, Record Group 94, boxes 29538, 29539, and 29548, National Archives, Washington, District of Columbia.

⁹ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteer Infantry*, 15.

¹⁰ Thomas Francis Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, 3.

of the Civil War. Garnett's force continued a northeastward exodus; Brig. Gen. C.W. Hill's brigade of the Army of Occupation, which included the Eighth, pursued for about five miles and snared a few stragglers.¹¹ However, Hill's prudent pursuit was ended with what Sawyer described as "a farce of the first water": a war "council" eschewing the demoralized condition of the enemy and the sufficient number of fresh troops available.¹² Even the overly cautious McClellan chastised Hill, who was censured and relieved.¹³

Marching continued in western Virginia, and the regiment was ordered to guard portions of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad throughout the winter. This routine task was made notable with a severe outbreak of typhoid fever contracted at a camp thereafter referred to as "Maggotty Hollow."¹⁴ Along with the marching and bivouacking, skirmishing occurred at Worthington, Hanging Rock, Romney, and Blue's Gap without much consequence.¹⁵ One bizarre incident occurred December 21, though, when two members of the regiment were playing cards and began quarreling. One withdrew his pistol, shot his comrade, and completed the heinous act by ramming a bayonet through the dying man's neck. The murderer was apparently never convicted.¹⁶

On March 1, 1862, the Eighth shifted to Winchester in the Shenandoah Valley, where it was brigaded with the Fourth Ohio, Sixty-Seventh Ohio, Fourteenth Indiana, and Seventh Virginia (Union) and placed under the command of Col. Nathan Kimball in Gen. Shields' division. Save the Sixty-Seventh Ohio, these units would remain together for the duration of the war.¹⁷ This transfer to the Shenandoah was a part of a new stratagem to mass men in the Valley, with two Union forces—one under the command of General Nathaniel Banks, which included Shields' division, and one under the command of General Charles Fremont—driving "Stonewall" Jackson's outnumbered forces south.

Consigned to defeating the federals one element at a time, Jackson attacked what he believed to be the rear guard of Banks' men at Kernstown on March 23, 1862. Instead, Jackson backed into Shields' entire division, commanded by Col. Kimball after Shields was seriously wounded on March 22. What ensued was a handsome federal victory that turned Jackson's left flank and sent him reeling into retreat. The Eighth performed ably in their first real engagement, taking some forty-six casualties. Sawyer recalled:

"Cannon balls were crashing through the trees . . . whizzing fearfully close to use. We were ordered to charge at once . . . The fire from both sides was intense, our men

¹¹ *Ibid.*; Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion* (Des Moines: F.H. Dyer, 1908), 1499-1500.

¹² Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteer Infantry*, 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 21; Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, 7.

¹⁴ Reid, *Ohio in the War*, 2:66.

¹⁵ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, 182.

¹⁶ The murder of Stephen J. Carr at Wire Bridge, near Romney, West Virginia, was confirmed in his service record, Compiled Service Records, Record Group 94, Box 29538, National Archives, Washington, District of Columbia. Mention of the incident is made by Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, 16. See also *Tiffin Weekly Tribune*, Friday, January 10, 1861.

¹⁷ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, 36.

fell rapidly, but gallantly held their places, loading rapidly and firing with unerring certainty, as the dead in our front plainly showed.”¹⁸

After the war, as “Stonewall” Jackson acquired his mystique and popularity, the federal veterans of Kernstown would write about the engagement with flourish and added significance. “Who has not heard of the first battle of Winchester [Kernstown]?” Brevet Maj. Gen. Alvin C. Voris asked. “This was the greatest battle of the late war.”¹⁹ Anniversary ceremonies and commemorations of the battle held in subsequent years probably spoke more to the sentimentality of their baptism of fire and heavy losses than to any true significance, for the battle only forced a continued federal presence in the Shenandoah and near Fredericksburg that would prevent men from joining McClellan’s operations to the east.

Thomas Galwey, Company B, returned to the regiment in April, having visited Columbus briefly on recruitment duty.²⁰ He visited the Kernstown battlefield before setting out with the regiment in search of “Stonewall” Jackson. “[He] is moving somewhere all the time, as lively as a flea,” Galwey remembered.²¹ The same could not be said of the federals. The Eighth became bogged down on perfunctory roads, exacerbated by the incessant rains; furthermore, they were lacking tents, provisions, and shoes. “We look like a pack of thieving vagabonds—no crowns in our hats, no soles to our shoes, no seats to our pantaloons.”²² By May, provisions finally arrived, and on May 12, the men of the Eighth broke their camp en route to Fredericksburg, where they would join with Gen. Irvin McDowell’s force on May 22.²³

At Falmouth on May 23, the division was received by Lincoln and Secretary of War Stanton; however, their stay in Fredericksburg was short-lived. The division was ordered back to the Shenandoah after it was learned that Jackson had driven Banks from the Valley. Crossing the Bull Run Mountains at Thoroughfare Gap, the disheartening return to the Valley was made; Shields’ division descended on Front Royal June 1. “We surprised Col. O’Connor and his Confederate force at Front Royal, capturing about three hundred prisoners and a considerable amount of ammunition and stores,” Galwey reported. The most notable capture, however, was the infamous Confederate spy Belle Boyd. “She is rather handsome and has some accomplishments although their luster is somewhat heightened by her rather romantic career,” he commented.²⁴

Despite these achievements, all was not halcyon in the Valley for the federals. Jackson’s twin victories at Cross Keys and Port Republic expelled the federals from the Valley and freed his

¹⁸ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, pp. 42-43; United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, vol. 12, pt. 1, 368-370. Hereafter cited as OR.

¹⁹ Brevet Major General Alvin C. Voris, “The Battle of the Boys,” in *Sketches of WarHistory, MOLLUS Papers*, vol. 4, Ohio Commandery (Wilmington: Broadfoot Publishing, Inc., 1991), 87.

²⁰ Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, 18-19.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Martin and Snow, eds., “*I am now a Soldier!*” *The Civil War Diaries of Lorenzo Vanderhoef*, 98-99.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 99-101; Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, 21.

men to adhere to Lee's troops outside of Richmond.²⁵ Thus in late June, Kimball's men were detached from Shields' division and ordered to join McClellan on the Peninsula between the York and the James Rivers. The men arrived the day following the Battle of Malvern Hill, the last of the humiliating Seven Days' Battles in which Lee had forced McClellan into stagnation at Harrison's Landing. In a torrential rain against the backdrop of Berkeley, birthplace of William Harrison, the men of the Eighth arrived and united with the Army of the Potomac. Kimball's brigade was assigned to "Baldy" Smith's division in the Second Corps.²⁶

The men of the Eighth bowled over the new body to which they belonged. "If ever an army had occasion to be proud of its organization, it is the Army of the Potomac," wrote one member of the regiment in a letter published in the *Cincinnati Commercial*.²⁷ Not only was the Eighth impressed with the discipline, morale, and élan consigned to them with their entry into the Army of the Potomac, they noticed the disparity in supplies, rations, and thus health. "This army has everything it wants. Fresh tomatoes are brought from Bermuda [Hundred]; new potatoes and onions are plenty. Health is improving."²⁸ The army lingered at Harrison's Landing until August 16, when Sumner's Second Corps formed the rear guard of the army as it moved northward to merge with Pope's men. "Our march was most fatiguing," Sawyer recalled.²⁹ At Newport News, the march halted as the federals embarked on steamers bound for Aquia Creek, where another vessel would float them into Alexandria.³⁰

Forming the rear guard, it took the Second Corps several days to coalesce into their new camp near Washington. In the process, the men of the Eighth heard the din of cannon in the vicinity of Manassas Junction, where a didactic battle had been fought in July 1861. Suddenly, "without explanation," the Second Corps was issued ammunition and ordered to cover the road to Centreville. "On every hand was the confusion of a defeated and retreating army," Sawyer wrote.³¹ Only instead of Lee's army, it was Pope's Army of Virginia making the retreat. The withdrawal was covered and the federals slithered into Washington with little time to collect thoughts and reorganize. Lee, in one of his boldest machinations of the war, would thrust his army northward into Maryland, aiming to affect war-weary Northern civilians and foreign observers to intervene on behalf of the Confederacy in a mission that would relieve Virginia of war's toils and garner much-needed supplies and rations.

The news having arrived that Lee's forces had commenced crossing the Potomac on September 4, the Eighth soon marched out of Rockville and into the Maryland countryside to check the invasion.³² On September 13, outside of Frederick, a stray copy of Lee's Special Orders No. 191 was discovered and forwarded to McClellan, who promised to "whip Bobbie

²⁵ See Darrell L. Collins, *The Battles of Cross Keys and Port Republic June 8-9, 1862* (Lynchburg: H.E. Howard, Inc., 1993).

²⁶ Martin and Snow, eds., "I am now a Soldier!", 101; Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, 54-60; Reid, *Ohio in the War*, 2: 67.

²⁷ *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, August 5, 1862, clipping, Samuel Sexton Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, 61.

³⁰ Martin and Snow, eds., "I am now a Soldier", 104.

³¹ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, 64-65.

³² Martin and Snow, eds., "I am now a Soldier!", 105.

Lee.” The Rebel army was dangerously divided, six of its nine divisions engaged in an attempt to capture Harpers Ferry. The next day, September 14, proved to be a disaster for the Army of Northern Virginia with the first battle of the campaign. “Heavy cannonading was heard to the front,” Sawyer remembered of South Mountain. “The roar of artillery in front was almost constant, and occasionally the dull, heavy swell of musketry could be distinctly heard.”³³ The Eighth was growing impatient and soon came up as a supporting line, though accomplishing little more than keen observation. As dusk suffocated the “severe” battle, all reflected on a scene “beyond description.”³⁴

For the Eighth, the horror of South Mountain was only a harbinger of Antietam’s miseries. “We formed our line of battle by daylight, and went to the front, fording Antietam[m] Creek, waist deep, and then charging up the hill for the enemy who were posted in strong force on the undulating ridges for a long way both to our right and left,” Daniel Daggett of Company D wrote home.³⁵ French’s division formed the center of the Union battle line; the “gallant troops pressed eagerly forward” into the Roulette orchard. Here, Kimball’s brigade, consisting of the Fourteenth Indiana, Eighth Ohio, 132nd Pennsylvania, and Seventh Virginia (Union), were held in reserve until “tremendous volleys” from the Rebels ensconced in the Sunken Road threatened to overrun the federal lines. Kimball ordered up his brigade, and with an emphatic “Forward, Eighth Ohio!” the men moved up to face “a most savage fire of musketry, grape and canister” for nearly four hours.³⁶

General Israel Richardson, commanding a Second Corps division, had advanced to the left of French’s position to further secure the flank. Meanwhile, the right flank had been “abandoned,” and the Rebels made a flanking attempt, which was repulsed heroically by the Eighth and Fourteenth Indiana as they changed fronts and charged under fire. “We maintained the fight with cartridges taken from the boxes of the dead and wounded,” Daggett noted.³⁷ For Kimball, this maneuver, executed “as veterans and as only brave men could,” had salvaged the right.³⁸ But it was a bloody salvage: of 324 engaged, 165 were killed, wounded, or captured; three companies were left without officers, and seventeen balls passed through the regimental colors.³⁹ Lorenzo Vanderhoef, who in 1861 had been so proud to finally be a soldier, was wounded in four places and began his journey through a litany of the general hospitals established in Frederick.⁴⁰ For the nation, the gruesome realities of South Mountain and Antietam both

³³ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, 72; Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, 35-37.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ George Henry Daggett, “Those Whom You Left Behind You,” in *Glimpses of the Nation’s Struggle: The Papers of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion*, vol. 30, *Minnesota Commandery* (Wilmington: Broadfoot, reprint 1992), 344. George Daggett, son of Daniel Daggett, presented these letters to the Minnesota Commandery on May 14, 1901.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 344-345; OR, vol. 19, pt. 1, 326-328; Azor H. Nickerson, “Antietam,” *Sandusky Daily Register*, November 10, 1862. Nickerson’s article, originally published in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, was not only reprinted in the Sandusky paper, but in the patriotic Philadelphia periodical *Blue and Gray*. Here, it assumed the title “Antietam: A Reminiscence,” in 1893. A year later, a second, virtually identical piece on Antietam appeared in *Blue and Gray* in the form of “Antietam - Sharpsburg 1862.”

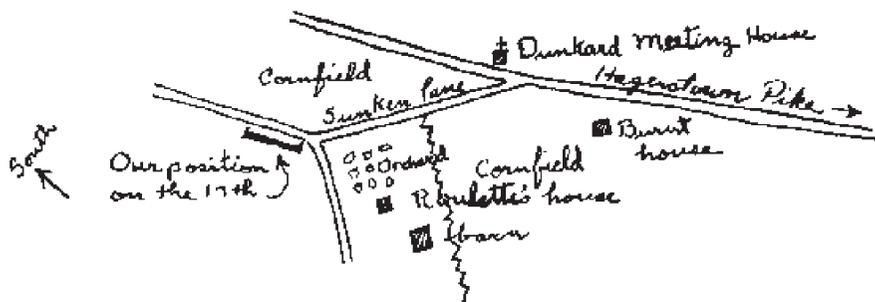
³⁷ George Henry Daggett, “Those Whom You Left Behind You,” 345.

³⁸ OR, vol. 19, pt. 1, 328.

³⁹ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, 81-83; Nickerson, “Antietam,” *Sandusky Daily Register*, November 10, 1862.

⁴⁰ Compiled Service Records, Record Group 94, box 29549, National Archives, Washington, District of Columbia.

repelled Lee's invasion and proffered the opportune moment for Lincoln to march forward with emancipation; for the Eighth, it offered a heroic moment to be memorialized in the moniker subsequently consigned to its brigade: the Gibraltar Brigade.⁴¹ Galwey consummated summarized their Antietam experience: "What would have been the result if Kimball's men had not fought gallantly all the forenoon?"⁴²



Thomas Galwey's Hand Drawn Map of the 8th Ohio at Antietam

On September 22, the Second Corps moved to Bolivar Heights, where it would remain until late October. "You have read of this place being surrendered to that traitor Miles," Sexton recorded in his diary from the unit's new position, from which they would depart for Falmouth, across the Rappahannock from Fredericksburg, Virginia.⁴³ By the time the Eighth reached Falmouth, the Army of the Potomac had a new commander. The prudence and politically induced views which constricted the war aims of McClellan finally did enough to effect his replacement by Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside. "The greatest dissatisfaction prevails everywhere in consequence," Galwey wrote, although he noted that next to McClellan, Burnside was the best liked man in the army.⁴⁴

For nearly a month—a month in which the men anticipated a movement on Fredericksburg— all that separated the federal army and its Rebel counterpart was the narrow valley formed by the Rappahannock River, allowing for such verbal interactions as this one:

Secesh to an Ohio picket - "What regiment do you belong to?"

Buckeye - "8th Ohio."

Secesh - "What state are you from?"

⁴¹ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, 81.

⁴² Thomas Galwey, "At the Battle of Antietam with the Eighth Ohio Infantry," in *Personal Recollections of the War of the Rebellion: Addresses Delivered Before the Commandery of the State of New York*, vol. 3, MOLLUS Papers (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1992), 85. The Galwey article tersely defends the actions of Kimball's brigade as a key component of the middle phase of the Battle of Antietam, suggesting that the actions had already been unfairly consigned to historical oblivion.

⁴³ Samuel Sexton, diary entry, September 27, 1862, in Sexton Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio.

⁴⁴ Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, 52-53.

Buckeye - "Ohio! Where else did you think, you darned fool?"

Secesh - "You came here by way of Bull Run, didn't you?"

Buckeye - "No, by Antietam!"⁴⁵

Apparently, mention of Antietam was enough to dissolve the exchange. And soon, for the Eighth, mention of Fredericksburg would have a similar effect. On December 12, the pontoon bridges that Burnside had ordered for a swift crossing of the river finally arrived after administrative failure and miscommunication. The next day, the battle opened with the Eighth forming on the right in Sumner's Grand Division. The regiment moved up Hanover Street with the First Delaware and Fourth Ohio to the left as skirmishers for French's division, meeting intense fire from Barksdale's Mississippians before clearing them out and garnering control of the surrounding buildings.⁴⁶ Summarily, the column was ordered forward at a double-quick to a line at the base of the Mayre's Heights. This frontal assault across an open killing ground was devastating for the Eighth; by 4 o'clock, they were out of ammunition. As Sawyer recollected:

During the entire day we were subjected to a most murderous fire of both artillery and small-arms, which swept our position, and the whole interval from our line to the town of Fredericksburg. Our line was too weak to advance further upon the enemy's works, and our position was not passed by any troops up to the time of our withdrawal.⁴⁷

Hour after hour of futility produced forty-four killed and wounded and a devastating, one-sided defeat for the Army of the Potomac. After the subsequent, humiliating "Mud March," the army would be led not by Burnside, but by Joseph Hooker.⁴⁸

With Hooker came noticeable improvements in morale, esprit de corps, and sanitation. "Our army has not moved, that is, in a physical sense, but I think it is observable that a vast improvement has been going forward," Sawyer wrote to Samuel Sexton from camp near Falmouth.⁴⁹ All expected an active campaign, which commenced on April 28, 1863, when the army crossed the Rappahannock; French's division assumed a position near the Chancellorsville crossroads in the haunting undergrowth known as "the Wilderness" at right angles to the main federal line. A fierce battle raged there the first three days of May, of which the most salient feature was Jackson's march against the federal left, smashing the federal XI Corps and earning another stunning victory for Lee. The Eighth played merely an observatory role in the battle, losing two men. Still, Sawyer understood that it was "quite unlike the three great battles" he participated in previously; it was rather "a series of desperate efforts, by each

⁴⁵ Daniel Daggett, letter, December 3, 1862, in George Henry Daggett, "Those Whom You Left Behind You," 346.

⁴⁶ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, 93-94; Reid, *Ohio in the War*, vol. 2, 68.

⁴⁷ *OR*, vol. 21, pt. 1, 298.

⁴⁸ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, 98.

⁴⁹ Franklin Sawyer to Samuel Sexton, letter, March 15, 1863, reproduced in Cincinnati Daily Commercial, undated clipping, Sexton Papers.

army to secure different points and positions . . . the battle was rather heard than seen [due to the undergrowth].”⁵⁰

At 11 o'clock May 5, the Eighth fell into the long line of retreat back to Falmouth, where it remained until mid-June, when the news of yet another northern invasion by Lee was received.⁵¹ As the blue lines slithered north in response, Hooker was deposed and replaced by Maj. Gen. George Gordon Meade on June 28. Three days later, marching along the Taneytown Road, the Second Corps was drawn into the unassuming borough of Gettysburg, where west of town, a meeting engagement had escalated into a pitched fight. “Towards noon we became sensible of the battle from the roar of artillery and the grim clouds of dust and smoke that gathered gloomily,” Sawyer recalled.⁵² Excitement grew as news disseminated; the Eighth anxiously awaited orders, which would come that evening from Maj. Gen. Hancock. He ordered the regiment to sleep on arms a mile to the rear of Cemetery Ridge line. Reveille sounded at 4 am July 2 and the regiment moved up to an orchard west of Taneytown Road near Ziegler's Grove.⁵³ “For several hours everything seemed unusually quiet,” Sawyer recollected. This ended with clangor and commotion in the direction of Sickles' notorious salient. At 4 o'clock, as the battle raged back and forth to the south, Sawyer was ordered to take the Eighth's 209 men and clear out Rebel skirmishers lodged on the Emmitsburg Road. They charged across the road, drove out the skirmishers, and established their own skirmish line about 250 yards west of the Emmitsburg Road having “awoken the Johnnies.”⁵⁴ As darkness draped the battlefield, guns slowly grew silent and the unit was ordered to maintain their position along the Emmitsburg Road “to the last,” though no assistance could be provided.⁵⁵ For twenty-six precarious hours, the Eighth gave new birth to its brigade epithet. Skirmish fire continued sporadically, but between 7 o'clock and 8 o'clock July 3, it became “murderous.” Galwey recalled that the fire the Eighth directed at the enemy skirmishers became “scientific”; as soon as a puff of smoke rose in their front, they would immediately aim and fire.⁵⁶

The enemy's intensity grew along the extent of the line, climaxing in the symphony of the “terrific cannonade” about 1 o'clock. Artillery shells of both armies whizzed over their heads; “for more than an hour,” the Eighth was literally detained in a forlorn position in the “horrid storm” of Pickett's Charge.⁵⁷ Despite its advanced position, unsupported but for Woodruff's Battery in Ziegler's Grove, the Eighth “sprang” to its feet and deployed into column as the cannonade waned and the Rebel infantry advance commenced. Pettigrew and Trimble's men

⁵⁰ Franklin Sawyer to Samuel Sexton, letter, June 3, 1863, in Sexton Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio.

⁵¹ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, 116.

⁵² Franklin Sawyer, *The Eighth Ohio at Gettysburg: An Address of Gen. Franklin Sawyer* (Washington, D.C.: E.J. Gray Printer, 1889), 3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 4; Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, 103.

⁵⁵ The other three regiments of the Gibraltar Brigade had been sent from Ziegler's Grove to East Cemetery Hill, where Early's division had launched an attack. See Gary B. Lash, *The Gibraltar Brigade on East Cemetery Hill: Twenty-Five Minutes of Fighting, Fifty Years of Controversy* (Baltimore: Butternut and Blue, 1995).

⁵⁶ Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, 109-110.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 112-117.

“advanced splendidly,” appearing as if they would overrun the Eighth’s position.⁵⁸ But they received a lashing: the Eighth charged the Rebels, many prisoners either falling back or throwing down their arms. Furthermore, in a consummately executed maneuver, the Eighth changed its front and executed a left wheel while firing, pouring lead into the left flank of Brig. Gen. Joseph R. Davis’ brigade from behind a weathered fencerow.⁵⁹ On the Confederate left that afternoon, there would be three other left flanking movements. The 136th New York, to the right of the Eighth, and the 125th and 126th New York to its left would anchor the envelopment of Davis’ brigade, metamorphosing the “distinct, graceful” Rebel lines into an amorphous mass.⁶⁰ The Eighth collected the colors of three regiments and captured some 300 prisoners, suffering nearly 50 percent casualties. Yet the victory was complete, Lee whipped, and the invasion repelled.⁶¹ The Eighth had played “a most conspicuous part” in the late, great battle, and the men were not only “greeted with rousing cheers” by their comrades, but extensive press coverage citing Sgt. John Miller, who would be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions that day.⁶²

The Eighth passed several weeks in Meade’s cautious pursuit of Lee until orders were received on August 15 to proceed to New York City to quell the draft riots; however, by the time they arrived, the riots had been contained. Likewise, the Eighth simply enjoyed a “continued ovation.”⁶³ For Edward Dickinson, Company B, this ovation ended in charges of intoxication and indecent exposure.⁶⁴

The Eighth returned to the field at Culpepper, seeing negligible pieces of the battles at Bristoe Station, Locust Grove, Mine Run, and Morton’s Ford.⁶⁵ Perhaps the most exciting event of autumn 1863 for the men was the Ohio gubernatorial election between Republican John Brough and the Copperhead leader Clement Laird Vallandigham. “It afforded me the greatest amount of pleasure to get the glorious news of the election,” Sawyer wrote to Sexton upon learning of Brough’s victory, noting so much had been done to “rebuke treason and traitors at home.”⁶⁶ The Eighth cast 191 votes in the election, only one vote for Vallandigham.⁶⁷ It seemed a propitious harbinger for Lincoln’s reelection the next year.

⁵⁸ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, 130-131; Jeffrey D. Wert, *Gettysburg Day Three* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 141; *OR*, vol. 27, pt. 1, 461-462.

⁵⁹ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, p. 131; Sawyer, *The Eighth Ohio at Gettysburg*, 7-8; *OR*, vol. 27, pt. 1, 461-462.

⁶⁰ Keith Snipes, “The Improper Placement of the 8th Ohio Monument: A Study of Words and Maps,” in *Gettysburg Magazine: Historical Articles of Lasting Interest* 35 (2006): 92-93.

⁶¹ Of the 209 men of the Eighth Ohio engaged at Gettysburg July 2-3, 1863, 18 were killed, 83 wounded, and one was missing for a total of 102 casualties. Sawyer, *The Eighth Ohio at Gettysburg*, 9.

⁶² William Kepler, *History of the Three Months’ and Three Years’ Service of the Fourth Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry* (Cleveland: Leader Printing Company, 1886), reprinted as *4th Ohio Volunteers Gibraltar Brigade Army of the Potomac* (Huntington, West Virginia: Blue Acorn Press, 1992), pp. 131-132; Reid, *Ohio in the War*, 2:68. On the press coverage, see “Gallantry of the Eighth Ohio,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, July 11, 1863, and the *Sandusky Register*, July 10, 1863. Sgt. John Miller of Company G had captured the colors of the 34th North Carolina and 38th Virginia and would be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor on October 31, 1864. See Gwen J. Hurst, *U.S. Medals and Rolls of Honor: Civil War* (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1999), 185.

⁶³ Reid, *Ohio in the War*, 2: 68; Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, 140.

⁶⁴ Compiled Service Records, Record Group 94, Box 29539, National Archives, Washington, District of Columbia.

⁶⁵ Reid, *Ohio in the War*, 2: 68.

⁶⁶ Sawyer to Sexton, letter, October 22, 1863, in Sexton Papers, MSS 185, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

With 1864 came reorganization, a new general-in-chief, and his stratagem of four federal thrusts to gradually furl the Confederacy into submission. One of those thrusts, an overland campaign against the Army of Northern Virginia and Richmond, was inaugurated in the Wilderness region the veterans of Chancellorsville knew so well. On May 5, the Eighth, along with the Seventh West Virginia, was ordered to advance up the Orange Plank Road to recapture several guns lost to the enemy by Brig. Gen. George Getty's division of the VI Corps. With the Eighth on the south side of the Orange Plank, it was "spiritedly done" and cited in Hancock's official report of the battle.⁶⁸ "Our clothes were literally torn to shreds," Galwey recorded of the peregrination through the underbrush.⁶⁹

With replenished haversacks, the men arose at 4 o'clock am May 6, moving rapidly through the woods before falling almost entirely into the "embrace" of Longstreet's flank attack. With Col. John Coons of the Fourteenth Indiana in command, his unit and the Eighth, with no visibility, were "fiercely attacked."⁷⁰ The Eighth suffered heavily, with eighteen men killed and wounded and two sent to Andersonville; however, the Rebel loss was just as burdensome, and the battle ended in stalemate.⁷¹ Nevertheless, Grant would not retreat like his predecessors might have. Skirmishing continued the next three days as the federals turned south along the Brock Road in a race to Spotsylvania Courthouse.

Lee won the race to that sleepy crossroads, but nobody would win in the ensuing bedlam. The first of two major attacks launched on the Rebel works occurred May 10. At 5pm, the Second and Sixth Corps "struggled stubbornly through the woods . . . only to meet a terrible repulse," an operation in which the Eighth suffered casualties of one killed, 23 wounded.⁷² But just after 5am May 12 came the major attack, led by Hancock's Second Corps. Sawyer led the First Delaware and the Eighth with orders to drive troops on their left before uniting with the balance of Carroll's brigade, at which time they would oblique to the right and attack the enemy trenches.⁷³ Unknowingly, the Eighth had entered one of the most savage fights of the war. As Galwey wrote:

Nothing can describe the confusion, the savage bloodcurdling yells, the murderous faces, the awful curses, superhuman hardihood, and the grisly horror of the melee! Of all the battles I took part in, Bloody Angle at Spotsylvania exceeded all the rest in stubbornness, ferocity, and in carnage.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteer Infantry*, 160-161; *OR*, vol. 36, pt. 1, 320.

⁶⁹ Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, 199.

⁷⁰ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteer Infantry*, 162-165;

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, 166; Reid, *Ohio in the War*, 2: 69.

⁷³ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, 167; Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, 202-209.

⁷⁴ Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, 210.

All regimental commanders in the Eighth's division were wounded, including their beloved Sawyer, who was struck in the left arm by an enemy ball.⁷⁵ Carroll was wounded on both May 12 and 13; he was promoted to brigadier general, but unfit for field command, his brigade was assumed by Col. Thomas Smyth.⁷⁶

Still, the campaign continued as the federals kept maneuvering towards Richmond, making bloody sojourns along the North Anna, Pamunkey, and Totopotomoy before once again confronting Lee's army June 1-3 at Cold Harbor.⁷⁷ The Eighth was merely involved in heavy skirmishing on the first. The next day, with shortages and exhaustion pervading the army, Grant delayed Meade's intended attack, proffering Lee an entire day to bolster his defenses and establish a killing ground. The federal assault finally began around 4:30am June 3. Smyth's brigade extended the federal lines south from the left of Brig. Gen. Robert O. Tyler's division, the right of which met the Cold Harbor Road.⁷⁸ Smyth stepped off with Tyler's division; Owen and McKeen's brigades were in reserve. Summarily, sharp skirmishing opened into a murderous fire from the Seventeenth, Forty-Second, and Sixty-Sixth North Carolina of Martin's Brigade (Hoke's Division). The Eighth, moving forward with the Fourteenth Connecticut to its right and the Fourth Ohio to its left, came within sixty yards of the enemy lines, but with thin ranks, the enemy position was "impregnable."⁷⁹ Thus ended what Sawyer dubbed a "sanguinary action" that snuffed out the lives of over 13,000 federals; Smyth's brigade had contributed some 170 to that total.⁸⁰ The macabre overland campaign had come to an end;⁸¹ maneuvering and an impeccable pontoon bridge would not only transport the federal army across the James to the vital rail junction of Petersburg, but transport it to nearly ten months of siege.

In the trenches opposing the city on June 25, 1864, the Eighth's term of service having expired, the unit was ordered to Columbus to muster out; however, there was comparatively little cheering. "Where would we find civilian friends to compare with soldier comrades?" questioned Galwey.⁸² Indeed, the sight of the Ohio River affected mixed emotions.⁸³ And then it was over as quickly as it began. Mayor Senter, brass bands, citizens, veterans, and a banner greeted the Seventh and Eighth regiments in Columbus. The regimental colors were forwarded to Governor Brough, who responded:

The record of the Eighth Regiment is among the most brilliant of those made during the war. ... Upon every field they have fought, and every contest in which

⁷⁵ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, 168. Command of the regiment was transferred to Maj. A.H. Winslow.

⁷⁶ David S. and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, s.v. "Samuel Sprigg Carroll, 1832-1893."

⁷⁷ Dyer, *Compendium*, 1499-1500.

⁷⁸ See Gordon C. Rhea, *Cold Harbor: Grant and Lee May 26-June 3, 1864* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 318-331.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 321, 331, 337-338; Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteer Infantry*, 172.

⁸⁰ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteer Infantry*, 172.

⁸¹ It was estimated that the Eighth Ohio fired nearly 56,000 rounds of ammunition from May 5, 1864 to June 3, 1864. Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, 236.

⁸² Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, 236.

⁸³ Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, 174.

they have been engaged, the officers and men of the command have displayed earnest zeal, courage and patriotic fidelity to the country.⁸⁴

The Eighth had enlisted 993 members, had witnessed the death in battle of 124, had lost 72 to disease, and had discharged 340 for wounds.⁸⁵ It marched over 2,260 miles, traveled nearly as much by rail and steamer, and participated in 76 battles and skirmishes.⁸⁶ After Antietam, its brigade was christened the “Gibraltar Brigade”; after Gettysburg, it became the “Bloody Eighth.” But statistics and reputations and epithets aside, it was the comradeship fostered in the regiment that was most important to many. Letters exchanged, reunion meetings held, encomiums delivered, and monuments dedicated would attest to regimental pride. On September 14, 1887, “Ohio’s Day” at Gettysburg, thirty-seven survivors of the Eighth and their families came to dedicate a regimental monument along Emmitsburg Road, commemorating those sons “who gave their lives and best energies to their country.”⁸⁷ Gradually, those surviving sons became scarcer, and with their deaths, the stories of their exploits became consigned to archival containers and impersonal publications.

Assistant Surgeon Sexton, who after the war would attain international recognition for his treatment of ear diseases, had come full circle from his childhood poetry recitations.⁸⁸ Oh, had he and the Eighth found the flashing brine! And my, did the spray and the tempest roar!

⁸⁴ Governor John Brough to Franklin Sawyer, August 3, 1864, in Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, 177.

⁸⁵ Dyer, *Compendium*, pp. 1499-1500; Sawyer, *8th Ohio Volunteers*, 184.

⁸⁶ Sawyer, 184.

⁸⁷ Keith Snipes, “The Improper Placement of the 8th Ohio Monument: A Study of Words and Maps,” 69; Sawyer, *The Eighth Ohio at Gettysburg*, 1-2. Snipes cogent article suggests that primary sources and reliable observances place the Eighth Ohio some 500 feet to the north of the position indicated by the monument at close proximity to the intersection of Emmitsburg Road and Long Lane. According to Snipes, the substantial influence of Bachelder’s erroneous *Isometrical Drawing* on the development of the battlefield played the major role in this misinterpretation.

⁸⁸ Obituary for Samuel Sexton, July 12, 1896, unmarked clipping in Sexton Papers, MSS 185, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio.

