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Their Chance for Redemption?: The Dauphin County Regiment at Second Fredericksburg

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Abstract

After a less than respectable showing on the slopes of Marye's Heights in December 1862, the 127th Pennsylvania Regiment found itself in desperate need of an opportunity to redeem itself on the field of battle. Could a mulligan assault on the same ridge be the key to restoring their honor? Assigned to Hall's Brigade in Gibbon's Division for the duration of the Chancellorsville Campaign, they now had a chance to find out. [*excerpt*]

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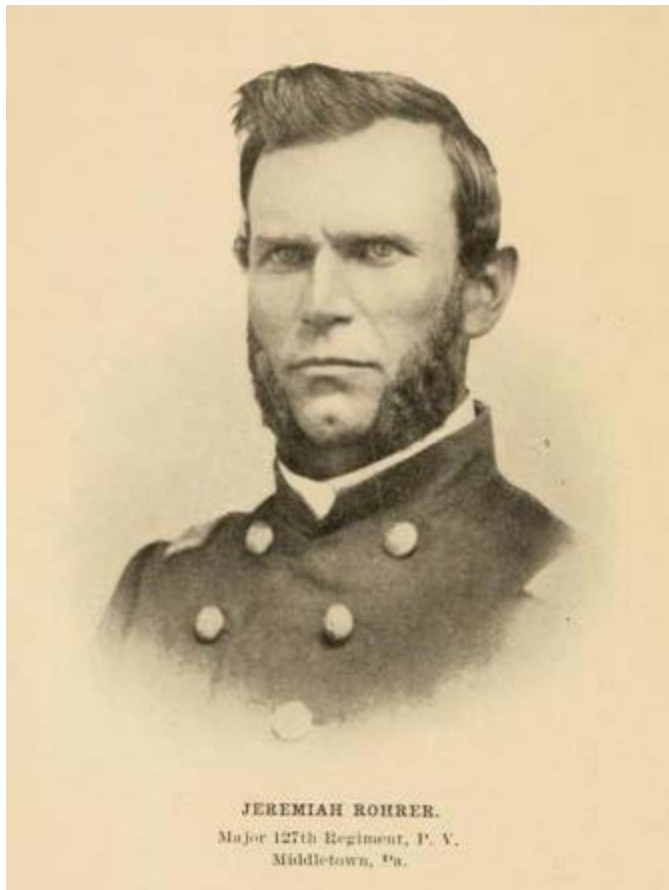
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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Their Chance for Redemption?: The Dauphin County Regiment at Second Fredericksburg

January 7, 2015



Major Jeremiah Rohrer, of the 127th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers

by Kevin Lavery '16

After a less than respectable showing on the slopes of Marye's Heights in December 1862, the 127th Pennsylvania Regiment found itself in desperate need of an opportunity to redeem itself on the field of battle. Could a mulligan assault on the same ridge be the key to restoring their honor? Assigned to Hall's Brigade in Gibbon's Division for the duration of the Chancellorsville Campaign, they now had a chance to find out.

By the spring of 1863, the Army of the Potomac was itching for another shot at the Confederates. The 127th Pennsylvania – colloquially known as the Dauphin County Regiment – now considered itself to be a hardened veteran regiment, mocking newer regiments that carelessly discarded their blankets and extra layers of clothing in anticipation of combat. As part of the detachment under General John Sedgwick designated to assault

the Confederate line from Stafford Heights as Hooker led his main army around the foe, Gibbon's division would again cross the Rappahannock River on pontoon boats, capture the town of Fredericksburg, and march on the Confederate position at Marye's Heights.

On May 2, Lieutenant Colonel Hiram C. Alleman and Major Jeremiah Rohrer were called before General John Gibbon, who reminded them that their section of the line would be particularly weak during the battle based on the division's formation, "and General Lee knows it; so both of you will be held responsible if you allow yourselves to be surprised." To ensure his point had been made, Gibbon then added, "You will be held

liable, and will certainly be shot.” Perhaps, as the regiment’s later conduct would suggest, these words should have been taken closer to heart.

While the regiment apparently fought well as the division took Fredericksburg and tried to storm Marye’s Heights, an unfortunate incident occurred on the night of May 4 after the Union’s assault had been rebuffed. Suddenly finding itself back on the defensive, Hall’s brigade spread out around Fredericksburg in a wide picket line to defend from a possible Confederate counterattack. Alleman had been knocked from his horse by a rebounding cannonball during the battle, leaving the regiment solely in the hands of Colonel William W. Jennings and Major Rohrer. Jennings oversaw the regiment’s left flank, while Rohrer commanded the right. Adjacent to Rohrer’s men, the 42nd New York Infantry – the Tammany Regiment – stood vigil. Its colonel, James E. Mallon, had been appointed officer of the day and was given authority over the picket line. If caught unawares by a Confederate assault, the brigade would risk being crushed against the Rappahannock and perhaps be decimated as a result.

And yet, although the men knew the responsibility they bore, a commotion broke out along the 127th’s right flank in the dead of night. “The moon shining dimly & rather foggy & dark,” Rohrer wrote in his diary, “the men at the front . . . imagined . . . that the rebel force was right on us.” Unfortunately – especially for the hapless Tammany Regiment – the alarm had been a false one. Startled, Rohrer’s soldiers had unleashed a volley of gunfire into the darkness toward Mallon’s men before beginning a panicked retreat. Apparently one of the fleeing soldiers was so confused that he reported to Jennings that Rohrer and his companies had been taken prisoner by the Confederate army.

Rohrer quickly sprang into action as his section of the line dissolved into chaos, pursuing his men and “threatening to cut them down” unless they stood their ground. Thanks to his leadership, “the line was again established in a few minutes.” It had been a close call both for the regiments involved and the rest of the brigade.

Or, at least, that was how Rohrer recorded the events. To the shame of the regiment, this incident was described by their brigade commander, Colonel Norman J. Hall, in a May 15 report to his superiors. After noting that his troops had performed for the most part admirably during the Chancellorsville Campaign, he recounted how some the 127th’s companies had “created a false alarm at night; fired into the Forty-second New York, and scattered toward the town. But for the prompt and judicious action of Colonel Mallon, and the good conduct of his regiment, this affair might have resulted very unfortunately.” In this account, it was the battle-hardened men and veteran officers of the Tammany Regiment who mitigated the risks posed by the 127th’s partial retreat, and not Jeremiah Rohrer.



Colonel James E. Mallon, of the 42nd New York Infantry

The authors of the unit's regimental history made no attempt to hide this embarrassing episode, though they did downplay its significance. Curiously, however, they blamed the entire incident on Colonel Mallon. The authors recorded how "during the night [while] both officers and men [were] tired and drowsy, some one on our right, said to be the 'officer of the day' fired a revolver." It was this shot – purportedly fired by Mallon – that supposedly incited the 127th's panic.

The regimental history, it should be noted, is based heavily on material from Rohrer's diary. The major's original diary entry observed how at "about 10 PM Colonel Mallon some distance on our right & 30 paces in front, fired a pistol" that startled the troops and apparently convinced them that the Confederates were attacking. Not only, then, did Rohrer credit the restoration of order to himself rather than Mallon, as reported by Hall, but he went so far as to accuse the New York colonel for being at fault for causing the incident.

Whose account can we believe? Both Jeremiah Rohrer and Mallon had reasons to minimize their own culpability and highlight their own part in the restoration of order. In the chaos of the night, both officers may have played a role in calming the panicked soldiers. But even if Rohrer's assertion that Mallon fired the shot that spooked the men is true, the 127th had a duty to react as a coherent fighting force instead of firing a panicked volley and fleeing. If Confederate troops had actually been upon them, their performance here suggests that the 127th might have allowed itself to be routed instead of standing its ground. The Tammany Regiment, in contrast, did not panic under friendly fire, even though they had a valid reason to feel threatened.

It is impossible to know exactly what happened that night, but regardless, it was another black mark against the 127th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers.

While reporting to Jennings and Alleman on May 5th about the barely-averted disaster, Rohrer was asked if he felt ill. "No," he replied, "but I am exhausted." He, and the remainder of the regiment, had reached "the limit of human endurance." Perhaps the battle took more out of them than they knew, or perhaps the men of the 127th were simply not as battle-hardened as they claimed. They certainly lacked the discipline of Mallon's force.

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