

National War, Local Tragedies

By David K. McDonnell (© David K. McDonnell, www.clandonnell.net)

Prior to the Civil War, the United States maintained a relatively small standing army. It became even smaller when many southern soldiers resigned upon their home state's secession. After Fort Sumter, both sides began to raise a volunteer army. But the actual raising of the armies was left to the states.

The first "draft" after the bombing of Fort Sumter was on April 15, 1861. Newly inaugurated President Lincoln requested 75,000 volunteers with 90-day enlistments. The number of volunteers was allocated among the states – with the greatest number to be raised in the larger states (New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Ohio) and the fewest in the smaller northern states. The same method was used later, when it became obvious that the war was going to be difficult and long, but the number of volunteers and the term of enlistment grew larger.

The Confederacy raised its army the same way. On April 16th, President Jefferson Davis called for 32,000 volunteers, allocated among the states. Louisiana's allocation, for example, was 5,000 volunteers.

Different regions within the state were then called upon by the state to organize regiments. A regiment contained over 1,000 soldiers, commanded by a colonel. The regiment typically consisted of ten companies of approximately 100 soldiers each, commanded by a captain. The regiment also had a number of people unassigned to a company, such as the command staff, regimental surgeon and medical staff, chaplain, drummer boys, and the like.

Cities and larger towns may have had enough volunteers to organize an entire regiment. If the local towns were not large enough, the regiment might use the entire county as a pool for volunteers. In rural areas, the volunteers for a regiment could come from several adjoining counties.

In any case, a soldier served in a company of volunteers from his hometown. He knew many people within the company even before he enlisted. As likely as not, the men in his company included his brothers, cousins, childhood friends, classmates and neighbors.

There were some advantages in this system. A soldier in a battle line under intense fire might be less likely to fall out of line and run away. If he did so, everyone in his hometown would know, and he would be shamed if he ever went home again.

The problem, though, was the local concentration of casualties. If a regiment happened to be in a particularly “hot” area of combat, a town’s entire population of young men could be wiped out in a matter of minutes.

Here’s a few examples, all from July 1, 1863:

The **14th South Carolina Volunteer Regiment** was organized early in the war. The volunteers came from several rural counties in the northern region of South Carolina. All of the members of Company K came from Edgefield County. Even today, Edgefield County only has 20,000 residents.

Company K started the war with the standard 100 or so men. But Civil War units typically lost up to a third of its strength to disease and other non-combat causes. The numbers continued to dwindle by death, wounds, capture, desertion, etc., as the war went on. Regimental losses were not filled by replacement. New volunteers or draftees were used to create and fill new regiments.

By the time Company K reached Gettysburg on July 1, 1863 (the first day of the three-day battle), it was down to 39 men.

The 14th was part of a brigade ordered to attack a Union position on MacPherson Ridge (west of Gettysburg). The Confederate brigade advanced steadily toward the Union line. The Union soldiers held their fire until the Confederates got close. On the command to “fire”, the Union soldiers let out a horrendous volley of musket fire that was devastating to the first line of advancing Confederates.

Within seconds of the command to “fire”, 35 of the 39 young men from Edgefield County were hit.

Later that day, the fighting shifted to the unfinished railroad cut through MacPherson Ridge. Many soldiers, on both sides, died in and around the railroad cut.

The **16th Maine** was organized as a regiment at Augusta, Maine, and virtually all of its members lived in and around Augusta. The 16th Maine went into the fight at the railroad cut with **298** soldiers. Within an hour, **all but 35 of the young men from Augusta were hit.**

The worst casualties at the railroad cut, and at Gettysburg, were suffered by the 26th North Carolina and the 20th Michigan.

Men from the **26th North Carolina** came from eight counties, in two regions. Half of the men were from the central part of the state where the coastal plain meets the piedmont, and half from the western mountains. Company G was formed with men from Chatham County in central North Carolina.

The **26th North Carolina** lost **714 of its 800 men at Gettysburg**. On the first day alone, in the fighting in and around the railroad cut, the 26th had 584 dead and wounded. **When the roll of Company G was called on the morning of July 2, one man answered** - and he had been knocked unconscious the day before by a shell burst.

The units fighting the 26th North Carolina at the time included the **24th Michigan**. The 24th was composed of men from Detroit and Wayne County. It was part of the famed Iron Brigade which saw hard service through the war. By Gettysburg, the 24th was down to 496 men.

362 of these 496 were lost (killed, wounded or missing) on Gettysburg's first day.