

A FORLORN HOPE

The Ninth New York Cavalry as a *forlorn hope* at Trevillian Station, Va., June 11, 1864. Let us see if the facts will bear us out in that statement.

The Ninth New York Cavalry has a published history that gives a very good account of the service of that grand-old organization. Yet the greater part of its glorious achievements are yet known to none, except in the memory of the aged survivors, and they are fast passing away—soon there will none be left to tell the story of much that is unknown to the general public,—and do we not owe it to those coming after to place on record some of the most important *unrecorded* achievements of that grand old Regiment that did so well in suppressing the greatest rebellion the world has ever seen.

It seems to be an established idea that an organization that has a long roll of killed and wounded in action was a fighting organization, and one that has not a long list of casualties did not do much fighting. The standard should be the punishment inflicted on an enemy. If an organization goes into an engagement and can inflict a loss of two, three, or four to one of its losses it has sustained, that organization has done something. Another organization goes into action and loses twenty-five, fifty or seventy-five per cent of its numbers and can show no damage inflicted on the enemy—simply stood up to be shot down—which organization is the fighting organization, the one that accomplished something or the one that did not? The only proof that an organization can show that it is entitled to the

distinction of being a fighting organization must be that it inflicted a more severe punishment on the enemy than it received, and on that basis the Regiment lays before its many admirers its record, and stands ready to show titles with any.

The Ninth New York has to its credit of being in one hundred and forty engagements, and there is none that is as indelibly stamped on the memory of all who participated as the battle of Trevillian Station, Va., where the Regiment made for itself a record second to no other organization in the cavalry corps.

There are other fields where the Regiment won special honor, but Trevillian is the *Magna Charta* of all others. The fight at Yellow Tavern May 11th, 1864, in which the enemy lost General Stuart, the Regiment took a prominent part; also the mounted charge on the 19th of September, 1864, at Winchester, Va., where the Regiment charged a heavy line of infantry behind a stone wall and brought out some two hundred prisoners, for which they received much praise.

In the early stages of the war the Union Cavalry of the Army of the Potomac were badly handicapped by not having a sufficient number of officers having experience in handling cavalry effectively. Not until the spring or early summer of 1863 did the Union Cavalry win much honor on the field of battle against equal forces of Confederate cavalry, but when the campaign of 1863 opened the Union could hold the Confederates pretty even—at all events they did have some respect for the boys in blue.

Gregg, with his division, on the third day's fight at Gettysburg, in a mounted charge and counter charge, carried off the honors in a three or four hours' well contested field. Kilpatrick in the streets of Hanover also carried the Stars and Stripes well to the front, and held them there. And the cavalry contests around Culpeper and Brandy Station in the fall of 1863 leaned in favor of the blue, but not until the campaign

of 1864 under the leadership of the little Irishman, Phil Sheridan, did they have much fear of the Yankee Cavalry (and here allow me to say that Sheridan turned out to be one of the best cavalry leaders the civil war produced on either side).

The roster of the Ninth New York Cavalry shows nearly 2,000 enlistments. Many of these never reached the Regiment and many, many more were discharged before the Regiment was mounted and ready for the field. When the Regiment was mounted in June 1862, there were about 700 men in line. Many had been discharged for disabilities, and many were sick in hospital. The campaign of 1862 was very severe on the men. Not being used to the exposures of storms and lying on the wet, cold ground, sent many to the hospitals; many of them never to join the Regiment again. The battle losses were not large in 1862, but the sick list was fearful. That, together with the battle losses, reduced the Regiment to less than 500.

The total losses of the Regiment for the whole term of its service were, killed and died of wounds received in battle, 8 officers, 90 men; wounded that recovered, 32 officers, 238 men; loss in prisoners, 4 officers, 135 men; died of disease, 5 officers, 122 men.

Total loss of killed, wounded and died of disease, 225. The wounded and prisoners, the most of them returned to duty sooner or later.

Now we will see what execution the Regiment inflicted on the enemy to compensate for the losses sustained. The Regiment is credited with prisoners taken in battle, 1,525 (in addition to this there were hundreds taken in patrol and scouting not included in the above), and it is stated by those who were in a position to know that there were many prisoners taken in battle by the Regiment for which they received no credit for. If the Regiment had received credit for all the prisoners that were taken by the Regiment, it is claimed (and with reason) that the list would show up fully 2,000.

Of the killed and wounded of the enemy that can be directly charged to the Ninth of course cannot be known, but they do know that on the majority of the fields fought over, where the enemy were driven from the field, there would be at least two in gray to one in blue, and allowing the same per cent of wounded to the killed on the enemy's side as is computed on our side, the Regiment inflicted a loss to the enemy of more than 3,000, against the losses of the Ninth in killed, wounded and prisoners of 506. How is that for a record—6 to 1.

The Regiment has also to its credit fifteen pieces of artillery taken in battle and five battle flags, and caissons, ambulances, and wagons without number, and neither the Regiment nor the brigade to which it belonged never lost a piece of artillery, caisson or flag, when the Ninth was in the organization.

There are other regiments that may show as good a record (for we know there were fine regiments in the service), but is there any that can show a better? There are many regiments that have longer lists of killed and wounded, more men taken prisoners, but can they show the execution done in proportion to their losses?

When you take into account the Regiment did not have in any of its fighting of 1863 more than 350 men, and in 1864, 250, and more often much less. At Trevillian, 196 men in line, and in the mounted charge at Winchester, September 19, 1864, 300 men, and brought out over 200 prisoners.

THE TREVILLIAN RAID.

General Grant's failure to break the enemy's right at Cold Harbor convinced him it was a useless sacrifice of life to make further attempts to gain a decisive victory north of the James River, owing to the difficulty of impassable streams to cross and the low, swampy condition of the country. He decided to move his army to the south side of the James; the conditions for supplying an army were more favorable than on the north

side. To move his army across to the James, it was very desirable that the enemy's cavalry should be drawn from his front and flank. So he ordered General Sheridan to take two divisions of his most serviceable horses and move around the left of Lee's army and destroy the railroad in the vicinity of Charlottesville and Gordonsville, also the James River Canal, and join Hunter if he could, then return to the Army of Potomac. Hunter, it seems, had come in from the Kanawha with some fifteen thousand men and surprised Early and driven him out of Lynchburg, but reinforcements were sent to Early, when he turned on Hunter and routed him, when Hunter broke for the mountains to save his army, and fleeing away from Sheridan instead of coming towards him.

On Sheridan receiving the order from General Mead he selected Torbert's and Gregg's Divisions taking only the serviceable horses, leaving the unserviceable horses and the dismounted men with the Army of Potomac. Owing to the excessive hard service the past month, fully one half of each command were either dismounted or the horses were so near used up that they could not endure the fatigue of such a raid.

When the two divisions assembled according to order at New Castle ferry there were in the two divisions, all told, about 6,000 men. In addition there were three or four light batteries. The force assembled at New Castle on the afternoon of the 7th of June, drew three days' rations for horse and man, which were to be carried by the men; also 140 rounds of ammunition—a reserve supply of ammunition being taken in wagons. The column moved out from New Castle on the afternoon of the 8th, crossed to the north side of the Pamunky and moved up that stream, and the north side of the North Anna to near its head waters, where he crossed to the south side on the road leading to Trevillian Station late in the afternoon of the 10th.

Sheridan had no sooner got his column under way than

Lee's scouts reported the movement to him, the estimated numbers, direction headed, and Lee correctly surmised their destination. Lee at once did just what Grant expected he would, ordered Generals Hampton and Fitzhugh Lee to take their two divisions up the river road on the north side of the James and hasten to the vicinity of Charlottesville and Gordonsville to intercept Sheridan, who is heading for that vicinity with two divisions of his cavalry.

Sheridan's scouts soon found Hampton and Lee pushing to the front apparently to get in ahead of Sheridan. They had also found Breckenridge's division of infantry making in the same direction, who had started one day sooner to reinforce Early against Hunter, so that made two divisions of cavalry of some seven or eight thousand, and one division of infantry of some eight to ten thousand, that Sheridan must expect to run up against if he carried out Grant's instruction, and most any one with less nerve than little Phil would have hesitated before putting his little force of 6,000 against that odds so far (some 200 miles) from any possible support. Did Sheridan waver? Let's see.

Hampton and Lee by forced marches reached the vicinity of Charlottesville and Gordonsville on the early part of the afternoon of the 10th, and not knowing whether Sheridan would come to Gordonsville or to Charlottesville, they must plant their forces on both approaches. So Hampton plants his division across the Gordonsville approach and about three miles in front of Trevillian Station, and Lee's division on the Charlottesville road some five miles to the right of Hampton, but near enough, it was calculated, that one could reinforce the other should occasion require. Each of them selected their positions and had ample time to fortify before Sheridan's advance came near.

Sheridan halted his column for the night of the 10th soon after crossing the river. During the night his scouts had

brought him information of the enemy's position. They informed him that Hampton's division were in a dense piece of timber across the Trevillian road about three miles in front of the station and protected by breastworks; that Lee's division were on the Charlottesville road about five miles to the right of Hampton's. On getting this information Sheridan gave orders to Custer that when he moved in the morning he was to take his brigade on a cross road that led over to the Charlottesville road, which he would follow until he ran onto Lee's forces; He was to manœuvre his force as though he was planning an attack with a larger force, not to engage them only for the purpose of holding them with the expectation that you are about to attack them with a large force, which instruction Custer carried out to the letter. On the morning of the 11th reveille sounded just as day began to break, feed and breakfast call soon after; boots and saddle soon after sunrise, and soon moved out.

Greggs' division had the right of the column on that day's march (Custer was in Torbert's division), Devon's brigade (the 9th was in Devon's brigade) was near the rear of column. The column had not gone more than three or four miles when they were halted, and must have stood there from an hour to an hour and a half; had heard distant firing far to the front. Merritt's brigade led Torbert's division on that day's March. When the enemy's advance was encountered General Merritt was directed to clear the way. He sent forward one of his regiments to develop the enemy strength. They drove the skirmishers back on the main line. They found the line in a strong position in a dense piece of timber and a dense undergrowth five or six feet high behind barricades of logs and fallen timber. The regiment sent in advance could make no impression on forcing the enemy back. Another regiment was sent to their assistance, and still could not move them. Merritt kept sending in his regiments one after another until his whole

brigade of five regiments were engaged, and still he could not move them back. Sheridan was sending in order after order that they must drive that line back, and the reply as often came back, the line is too strong, it can't be done without reinforcements. Sheridan, you can imagine, was getting considerably nervous, knowing the enemy's strength and how situated; that Lee was liable to be down on him at any moment, realized that something must be done and right away. Breckenridge's infantry, if they were not already in his front, soon would be. Sheridan was pacing back and forth some ten or fifteen rods in rear of Merritt's line. After these replies to his repeated orders that they could not, they were too strong, he turned to General Devon, and says, General Devon, haven't you got some men that will break that line. General Devon replied, Yes, by G—d, I have, General, and turning to his adjutant-general, says, Bring up the Ninth. That is how it happened the Ninth was sent for. When the Ninth got on the ground the General was pacing back and forth. As the regiment came up they were halted some fifty or a hundred feet before reaching the General and ordered to dismount and prepare to fight on foot (cavalry dismounting to fight on foot takes one-fourth its fighting strength to take care of the horses; one man in each section of fours is detailed for that purpose). After dismounting and line formed there were 196 men in line, and as they filed by near where the General stood, Colonel Sackett leading his regiment, the General asked the Colonel what regiment that was; he replied the Ninth New York, you will hear their yell in a few minutes. The General said, They are not to charge, are they? The Colonel said, General, all H—ll can't stop my men, they were never known to be on the line five minutes without charging. As the regiment filed past by where the General stood with its 196 boys in line, a close observer could not help but notice what close scrutiny the General gave each face—whether it was to detect signs of fear or whether it was sym-

pathy for the brave boys—for there is no doubt that if a mind-reader had been present and could have read the General's mind, he would have found this: There is not one chance in a thousand of one coming out alive; so few succeeding where a whole brigade of two thousand to twenty-five hundred failed. Impossible!

Gregg's division did not participate in the engagements of the 11th; they were left foot loose for emergencies. The Regiment deployed in skirmish formation, which is, for cavalry, single rank, two to three paces apart, thus giving the Regiment a front of from twelve to fifteen hundred feet. The line was formed some fifty paces back of Merritt's line. There was no enemy in sight or anything to indicate that an enemy was there. Merritt's men kept up a continuous firing and the enemy replying in their front, but nothing to indicate an enemy in front of the Ninth. The order came down the line, Forward! and the line moved up to join on Merritt's right. As the line reached Merritt's line, all at once without warning, such a blast and withering fire, so close the heat from the guns was like a blast from a furnace, or from the infernal regions. If there was one there was from three to five thousand muskets fired directly in the faces of those 196 men along the whole front of the regiment, which cut down one-fourth of the regiment. Colonel Sackett was mortally wounded by that volley and died two days after. Did the 150 men left halt or falter? No, no! Every man commenced cheering and firing, either carbine or revolver, as fast as they could discharge their pieces, whether they saw the enemy or not, and I don't suppose one in ten had yet seen an enemy, every man rushed into that dense thicket—cheering and firing, not knowing whether they were rushing onto five hundred or five thousand. The rush, cheering, and rapid firing did it, but the truth of the great success was due as much to the dense foliage preventing the enemy seeing what force was coming against them. The cheering and rapid

firing led the enemy to believe they would be overwhelmed, so got out of the way as quick as possible. The Ninth drove the enemy that were in front of them through the wood a half mile or more and into the open field, when for the first time the Regiment could see how much of a force they had been driving, from three to five thousand, from their protected position and for a half mile or more, with the small force of 150 men, with both flanks in the air and still driving them. General Torbert rode out on the field soon after the Regiment line got into the field, and knew for the first time what the Regiment had been doing. He saw the force the Regimental line had routed and driven from a strong position (from three to five thousand in numbers) that Merritt not advancing his lines at the time the Ninth charged, thus affording no support whatsoever to the Ninth, whose flanks were both in the air, with an enemy of more than ten to one in their front and no support near, was very much surprised at the condition, and at once sent an order for the First New York Dragoons to the protection of the right of the Regiment and the Fourth New York to the left flank, but they did not reach their positions until the Ninth had reached the station and had orders to advance no further.

When the Regiment reached the station and the two regiments that had been sent had taken their positions on the right and left with orders to advance no farther, to throw out a strong picket in front and prepare to pass the night. In the morning of the 12th the Ninth was permitted to go back to their horses and make coffee and get breakfast, which the men felt the need of, as they had had nothing since their early breakfast of the morning before.

It will be proper to repeat what a rebel major said when he was brought in a prisoner. He was taken just as they had been driven out of the woods into the field, which will go to show how confident the enemy were of using Sheridan up. When this major was taken up to headquarters where there

were some three or four hundred prisoners already assembled, he stopped and looked over the prisoners and broke out in these words, Wall, by G—d, this beats h—ll, he says. I was up at headquarters about 3 o'clock, where they had a general conference of officers, and I heard them offering to wager any amount they would have the Yankee cavalry bagged before right, and again casting his eyes around, says, By G—d, this looks like it, don't it?

Has the claim been fully sustained to the satisfaction of the most critical that the Regiment was a forlorn hope at Trevillian Station June 11, 1864, and did the Regiment make a record entitling it to be in the class of the fighting organization of the civil war?

In the first place, to expect that less than two hundred men could possibly do what a brigade of five full regiments had failed to do; in fact, had said was impossible without reinforcements after the General's repeated orders that they must force and break that line; and to have that strong brigade simply lay there and not to attempt to advance when the line joining their right, consisting of less than two hundred men, had broken through and was driving everything before them, seems a quixotic tale, but the facts are too plain for denial.

In the next place, after the Regiment had succeeded in driving the enemy from its position along the whole front of the Regiment, and those 150 men forcing back that line of more than ten times their number, with both flanks in the air as they advanced, and no assistance sent to protect their flanks and rear for more than three hours, and an advance of continuous fighting for two and a half to three miles with that condition from the time the line was broken, certainly leaves but one of two conclusions, that the Regiment had done the unexpected, or some one had lost their heads, and it most assuredly was not the Ninth New York. The Regiment took about 200 prisoners.

The Twelfth Sheridan, bright and early, advanced on the enemy, Gregg's division taking the brunt, as they were but lightly engaged in the fighting of the day before. The Ninth was not called on (passed the time idly in camp and doing picket duty) as the Regiment had such a hard fight the day before they condescended to let the Regiment lay still. Sheridan pressed the enemy on all sides. Hampton and Lee united their forces, but did not seem inclined to fight except on the defense. Sheridan had detachments tearing up railroads, so by the evening of the 12th the different roads were pretty effectually destroyed, at least for immediate use, and having done all that was expected, withdrew his lines in the night and quietly started back to White House landing where supplies were awaiting him.

Grant, in Sheridan's absence, had moved to the south side of the James and sent a telegram to Sheridan at the White House to break up the depot of supplies there and send them by boat to City Point, and the wagon train to bring across with him. There were some five hundred wagons to guard across to the James and keep a watchful enemy from capturing or destroying, but he got them through without the loss of a wagon.

Thus terminated the second one of Sheridan's independent raids where he did great damage to the enemy since coming to the Army of the Potomac and established his reputation as a successful cavalry leader.

BY ONE WHO WAS THERE.

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SUPPLEMENT

In the account of the Trevillian engagement an item of interest to the records of the Ninth New York Cavalry was not mentioned and never has appeared in print that anyone of the Regiment has ever seen, and is entitled to worthy mention as one of the brilliant deeds of the gallant old Regiment. After the Regiment had fought its advance to the Station and had orders to advance no farther, off to the left, a half mile away, General Custer could be seen apparently surrounded by a far superior force of the enemy, who had captured his battery and could be seen running it off the field. The Second Squadron of the Ninth (Companies M and L), who had had their horses brought up from the rear, gallantly charged down, led by Captains Wooley and Mason, to the relief of General Custer and recaptured his battery from the enemy, and two hundred prisoners and two battle flags, all of which they turned over to General Custer, and received no credit for either guns, prisoners or flag; but they did receive the thanks of General Custer for saving him from being taken prisoner and for the return of his battery.

Since FORLORN HOPE was published several of the old comrades have written they did not think the Regiment was given full credit for all its captures. Major E. P. Putnam refers to a publication, called the *Red Book*, which is on file in the secret archives of the State Department at Albany, which gives an

account of the turning over to the State the regimental flags of various organizations, among them that of the Ninth New York Cavalry, at Albany, New York, July 4, 1865. Those being present and on the platform were: R. E. Fenton (who was then Governor) and State officers, Lieutenant General U. S. Grant and staff, and some fifteen or twenty other general officers of the State who had become prominent during the war, including Brigadier General Thomas C. Devens, who commanded the Second Brigade, in which the Ninth saw its most active service. General Butterfield delivered the presentation address for the Chautauqua County Regiments, with a brief historical sketch of each organization. Of the Ninth Cavalry it says, in part: The Regiment was organized at Westfield, Chautauqua County, in September and October, 1861; was recruited from Chautauqua, Cattaraugus, Wyoming and St. Lawrence Counties and the cities of Albany and New York, and went into the field with 940 men on its rolls, and during its three years and more of service there were received 1,591 recruits, making in all borne on the Regimental rolls 2,531 men, and that during the campaigns of 1863-4 the Regiment is credited with the capture of 47 pieces of artillery, several hundred wagons, caissons, ambulances and over 1,000 prisoners.

The above captures do not include any of the captures of Sheridan's Cavalry in the campaign of 1865 (in all of which the Ninth Cavalry bore an important part), from Waynesborough, Fivefork, Sailors Creek, etc., in which Sheridan says his Cavalry captured 73 pieces of artillery, 31 battle flags and many thousand prisoners.

General Thomas C. Devens, in his report (as recorded in the official records of the Civil War)—in the Shenandoah Valley campaign—is mostly of the Brigade movements, and all the Regiments in the Brigade get frequent mention of gallant work done, up to the 19th of September, at the battle of Winchester (the Opequan he calls it), where he gives the Ninth special

mention in his report. He says the Brigade was very active all the forepart of the day; many severe engagements in getting and defending positions; when, soon after midday, Merritt's Division was in line, mounted near the center of Sheridan's line of battle, with the enemy's infantry in his front, with the hills and bluffs in their rear bristling with their artillery, with his (Devens') Brigade on the left of the Division. He says Merritt ordered him to send a Regiment to the front, and he ordered the Ninth to advance in regimental line, and the First Dragoons to support them. The enemy's infantry was holding a strong position behind a stone wall a little to the left of the front of the Regiment—a short half mile away. He says he ordered the Regiment to advance. The enemy, seeing this move, brought up a Regiment of Cavalry in front of a piece of timber on my right front. I at once ordered the Ninth to charge that line of Cavalry, which the Ninth did in grand style, led by the brave Colonel Nichols, the First Dragoons supporting. He says the Southern chivalry could not stand that impetuous charge of the gallant Ninth, but broke for the rear in great disorder and left as trophies in the hands of the charging yankees as prisoners a Lieutenant Colonel and some ten or twelve men. He says as soon as the enemy's Cavalry disappeared he gave the order to change direction to the left, facing the Infantry behind the stone wall; that the men executed the order splendidly at the full charge, and the wild cheering and the gleaming sabres of the Ninth as they dashed on and over the stone wall right into that Division of Infantry like a whirlwind, cutting right and left with their trusty blades, dealing destruction and death in their path. It was a terrible sight. On, over and through the rebel lines dashed the wild troopers, slashing and cutting down everything before them, pistoling those who had again seized their guns after having surrendered, taking prisoners by the score, the rebel batteries from the heights in the rear redoubling their fire, which they distributed

impartially alike on friend and foe. The brave Colonel Nichols of the Ninth led his gallant boys in this, the most gallant charge made by any command in the great war. The Regiment brought out three captured battle flags and some 400 prisoners, and caused a total rout of the Division of Infantry, which Sheridan was quick to see, and ordered an immediate advance of his whole line, and the enemy broke in the greatest disorder and rout, not ceasing in their flight until reaching their stronghold at Fisher's Hill, 22 miles from Winchester.

Of the battle of Cedar Creek, which was fought October 19, thirty days later, General Devens says: The Second Brigade was in the thick of the fighting from early morning, and by its stubborn and heroic resistance did much to check the victorious enemy and turn an utter rout into a glorious victory; that after the enemy had been forced back across Cedar Creek the Ninth was put in the advance, with the First Dragoons supporting. The Ninth, with its usual dash, charged the fleeing enemy, capturing guns, wagons and war material of all description, which the enemy in its mad flight were throwing away, too badly frightened to make any resistance to the onrushing yankees. Not even in their stronghold (Fisher's Hill) did they stop to make much of a check to the onrushing victors, but over and through their strong position they fled, with the gallant troopers of the Ninth close after them, shooting and slashing with their trusty blades for fully twenty miles. Not until midnight did they cease the mad pursuit, bringing in 22 pieces of artillery, 2 stands of colors, 1,000 prisoners, many horses, wagons, ambulances, etc., and the enemy so utterly routed and defeated they never fully recovered their former valor.