

**HISTORY OF THE SECOND
MASS.
REGIMENT OF INFANTRY:
SECOND PAPER**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649341405

History of the Second Mass. Regiment of Infantry: second paper by George H. Gordon

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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GEORGE H. GORDON

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THE ADDRESS.

CHAPTER II.

At the earnest request of the Association, I have prepared a second paper upon the history of our regiment. My narrative is resumed with the news of our defeat at Manassas. I shall tell of the part taken by us from the hour when Gen. McClellan began the creation of the Army of the Potomac until we marched with him as part of that army for the second invasion of Virginia. I shall touch briefly upon the trials which resulted in the creation of a well-disciplined army, only hinting at the magnitude of the task to which Gen. McClellan devoted himself with a soldier's experience and a magnetic power. It will remain for the coming historian to declare that in this creation the genius of the pupil confronted the skill of the master at Appomattox, when Lee surrendered his whole army to that Army of the Potomac which grew steadily and sturdily from the seed planted by George B. McClellan.

While we were occupying Harper's Ferry as a temporary garrison, our regiment furnishing the necessary guards and its colonel commanding the fort, a daily paper received on the 25th day of July announced that the President of the United States had raised Mr. N. P. Banks, late of Massachusetts, from a private citizen to the rank of a Major-General of Volunteers, and had ordered him to relieve Gen. Patterson of his command. As a Massachusetts man, I was appealed to: What did I think of the truth of this report? "It has no foundation," I replied. "I have," I added, "a slight acquaintance with Mr. Banks, — Governor Banks, as we call him, — and I think I can assure you that he has too much good sense and good judgment to assume the responsibilities of such rank

until he has fitted himself in subordinate situations to know something of a soldier's profession, — in which," I was about to add, "he is now totally inexperienced," when a knock at the door of Gen. Patterson's headquarters, where we were in discussion, announced a messenger, who brought, with the compliments of Gen. Banks to Gen. Patterson, the further information that in a few moments the former would present himself in person, to receive upon his shoulders the heavy burdens which were afterwards to be laid upon the Army of the Shenandoah.

Thus it was that the reign of Patterson within the Department of Pennsylvania was transferred to Banks, who changed the designation of the department to that of the Shenandoah. It was only one week later that the Army of the Shenandoah — with the exception of our regiment — was ordered to cross the Potomac, to take up positions in Maryland. We were left to garrison Harper's Ferry, our numbers increased by twenty cavalry-men under command of a non-commissioned officer. The order directing me to hold the outpost of Harper's Ferry was dated the 28th of July, but it was followed by another, dated the 29th of July, issued from Sandy Hook, in which three companies of the Second Massachusetts Regiment, with the cavalry detachment, were ordered to remain as a garrison at Harper's Ferry, while the remaining companies, with three guns of the Rhode Island Battery, to be commanded by the colonel of the Second Massachusetts Regiment, were ordered to cross the river into Maryland, and take position on the western face of the Maryland Heights.

Transferred to the plateau overlooking the Potomac, from an elevation half-way up the mountain, seven companies of our regiment were in position to cover the three commanded by Lieut.-Col. Andrews at Harper's Ferry. We were in an exposed location. Deprived of our tents, we sought shelter under leaves and branches. The scene was picturesque so long as the leaves were green, and the repose was sweet so long as the sticks interwoven with branches remained pliant.

In furnishing guards from Sandy Hook to Harper's Ferry; in closely watching the mounted scouts of the enemy, who occupied the hills beyond Bolivar Heights as soon as our troops were withdrawn; in drilling and in military exercises, — the poetry of life began to harden into prose; the men began to grumble.

There was no longer the excitement of a campaign, to end in victory and peace, and ensure our return to homes with the green laurels of the victor purchased at an easy price, but there was to be moulded the slow and sure conviction that the war had just begun; that home was in the distant and uncertain future; that the way now entered upon was to be trodden with a spirit and a purpose, in the upholding of which, the head was much oftener to be called into counsel than the heart. In short, on these Maryland Heights we found that the gay sport of an hour had been turned into the grim duty of a life, to be performed with all the resolve of the mind, with all the purposes of the heart, and with a sacrifice of those cherished hopes which too many indulged in when we marched gayly for the seat of war, — hopes expressed to me by one good woman, who said, looking into my face as the full companies of the Second were marching out of Camp Andrew on our last morning there, "We look to you, Col. Gordon, that you return again in safety all these young men to their homes."

Never were there soldiers who so easily braced themselves to the change. The three months' volunteers were now returning to their homes. This was, to our men, a hard sight to bear. At first some of them reproached themselves that they had enlisted for the war, then, reasoning with each other, asked eagerly if indeed they had. After much questioning, many forced themselves to the conclusion that they had not; and then, as if to strengthen conviction, they sang, in a dirge-like wail, "We are going home." None who heard will ever forget those mournful sounds as they rose evening after evening, when the lamps shone dim through the huts on the Maryland

Heights. In vain the singers tried to make themselves believe that what they sung was to come to pass ; there was no heart in the voice, no hope in the heart, and there was despair in the tones. It required but the mildest of reproof, and the briefest allusion to the history of the enlistment of our regiment, to dispel forever any further claim on the part of any member of the Second Massachusetts Regiment to be considered a three months' volunteer.

That hard work is the best cure for melancholy minds is a common experience, in which those who attended daily drills under my command will concur. I gave the men no time to brood over sorrows, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing the regiment as gay and contented as soldiers ever are ; for it is to be remembered that the temptation to grumble when there is anybody to grumble at, strong in citizens, is irresistible in those who cannot depend upon themselves, but must rely upon the watchfulness of their officers. Our men gave way to this temptation in letters to their friends, through whom by mail I received most anxious appeals, — generally, however, touching the stomach.

Says one, dated the 8th August, 1861, after alluding to the "patriotic and intelligent constituency" that the company he refers to can boast, — "The prayers of this Christian community, both private and public, have followed you." "We are not ignorant," he continues, "of the fact that many hardships and privations are incident to a soldier's life, both in the camp and field, but were not prepared to hear that some of your command have suffered much for the want of food. We had supposed the communication with Baltimore and Washington was open, that the Government had supplies, and that the quartermaster was *honest*; and we can hardly believe that it has not been the result of accident or necessity. Some have purposely disguised their feelings from their friends as long as possible, and none would wish to make their complaints public. They say they are willing to submit to *strict*

discipline, to fight, and die if need be, but they can't *starve*, and not complain, when the Government is able to feed them. They all speak in the highest terms of *yourself*, and generally of their company officers. They say, however, that some of the officers in the regiment *swear* at the *men* in giving their orders ; use harsh, insulting, and abusive language ; and while they have seen men punished severely for tasting liquor given to them, or taking a single glass from over the fence, some of the officers are too drunk to 'perform their duty.' We have heard, in confirmation of the above, that while some of the retiring regiments *cheered* the men of the Second Regiment they *groaned* for the officers. It may not be true. These things distress our people much, and I have been almost constantly besought by those whose friends are in the regiment, to write you in relation to them." The writer closes with an admission that civilians understand but little about military affairs, and should be very careful not to interfere too much, but excuses himself because he has written "at the request of wives and mothers deeply feeling for their husbands and sons."

I have given you a picture of the returning regiments who groaned at our officers in my last paper, in which I set forth such a divergence of opinion as to the conduct and government of a regiment, that I thought it but natural my course should have displeased the Pennsylvania volunteers for three months ; who, when they groaned, were absolutely marching to their homes with the sound of the enemy's guns in their ears, — turning their faces homeward against the entreaties and supplications of their commander, Gen. Patterson, that they would remain and strike one blow to prevent, if possible, the junction of Johnstone with Beauregard at Manassas ; but in vain : their time was out, home they would go, and home they went, on their way groaning at the officers of this regiment in their disapprobation. It is needless to say that for any real cause, all the complaints in the letter were as little worthy attention as this.

There was also a letter from a Massachusetts Senator in Congress, dated August 12, saying: "Many of your men are writing home letters stating they are suffering for food, and these letters are having great influence. Can't this be righted?" If this honorable Senator had been more of a soldier and less of a politician, he would not have asked such foolish questions. He would have known that irregularity in the supply of food is an inevitable accompaniment of the movement of armies, and that the better the soldier the less he grumbles at the inevitable.

But the change in our circumstances from the offensive in Virginia to the defensive in Maryland wrought another change, which our enemies appreciated. The neighbors of that farmer who was paid for green grass and down-trodden fields at our first encampment at Martinsburg, had themselves suffered from an appropriation of the contents of well-stocked larders at their homes. Inspired, therefore, by the success of the Martinsburg farmer, and forgetting that the result of Manassas effectually dispelled the tender and half-regretful emotions with which we had drawn the sword, they made complaints and asked compensation for their losses. A Virginian informed me by letter that, though his ancestors came from a line of warriors, even tracing them to one of the generals of the time of Canute, the line in later days had tended rather to peaceful clergymen than to fighting men: and thus accounting for the reason why the descendant of a line of kings stoops to sue where he ought to strike; makes piteous wail over losses of butter, cream, vegetables, and ham, over clover and wheat and knocked-down shocks, and pickets in his fields; his clover-seed bags were slit with bayonets, their contents spilled. "I make no charge," says the writer, "for the provisions eaten by the men, for I have never been in the habit of charging the wayfarer; but I do complain," he adds, "that twenty-four dollars and fifty cents worth of clothing was taken from my servant man Peter"; then there follows as an out-

pouring of grief, an ejaculation, "None but Wisconsin would steal from the poor blacks." It was hardly politic to term us gentle tourists or needy wayfarers, or to intimate that Wisconsin would steal; and perhaps that is the reason why the complainant was not paid. Another sufferer tried it by endeavoring to fix a personal responsibility upon me, but this was in Maryland, at Sandy Hook. "Col. Gordon, Dr." the bill read. The items varied, but there was a monotonous sound of ham, jelly, and pickles; then there was an item for smashing a lock on a closet door; then something for damages to furniture and house. Whoever had the pickles had the spree: the Colonel of the Second Regiment had neither.

From the 30th of July to the 17th of August — now melted by fierce heat, and now drenched with rain that poured at night in streams from that unmitigated blessing, a rubber blanket; with men and sometimes officers, to-day impatient, grumbling, and capricious; to-morrow docile, earnest, and contented — time passed in the gradual acceptance of a discipline which not only controlled the habits but exercised an influence even over the thoughts.

By the 17th of August the alarm and excitement from an anticipated forward movement of the enemy was on the increase. Large numbers of troops at and in the immediate vicinity of Washington, to some implied a caution arising from knowledge of offensive movements in contemplation, to others not so much a knowledge as a conviction of what ought to be the movement of our enemy; and hence the military propriety of preparing to check what an enemy ought to attempt.

More than the real result to us, I think, thoughtful men feared for complications in our European relations. The results of the battle of Manassas were magnified for the transatlantic public, while lies of immense proportions were set afloat by our Northern and Southern foes, becoming huge on the regular steamer day. Thus before we left our drenched huts on the hill-side, rumors filled the air that Siegel's entire