



“More like Demons than Human Beings”



In the opening chaos at the Battle of Cedar Creek, the men of the 8th Vermont regiment were assigned a mission that was *“to cost the bloodiest sacrifice to lie on the altar of patriotism.”* This monument both honors and symbolizes what that sacrifice meant.

8th Vermont Regiment

Organized and mustered in as a two-year regiment on February 18, 1862, the unit was sent to the Department of the Gulf in Louisiana, where it guarded railroads and performed other duties. Assigned to the 19th Corps in January 1863, it saw service during the Red River Campaign (May), the siege of Port Hudson (May-July) and the Sabine Pass Expedition (September). When its enlistment expired in early 1864, it was designated a “veteran volunteer” regiment when enough men re-enlisted. It was sent north in July, along with the rest of the 19th Corps, to Washington, D.C., and then on to the Shenandoah Valley, where it participated in the battles of 3rd Winchester (September 19) and Fisher’s Hill (September 22).

The Suicide Mission at Cedar Creek

Desperate to achieve a Confederate victory, Lt. Gen. Jubal A. Early and his commanders devised a daring plan to attack the encamped Federals. Following an all-night march the Confederates rolled out of a dense fog in the pre-dawn hours of October 19. Catching many Northern soldiers sleeping, the Confederate onslaught overran the Union 8th Corps. In an effort to buy time, even at the cost of annihilation, a force was sent out to hold the enemy in check until the 6th and 19th Corps had time to form. Colonel Stephen Thomas’s brigade (consisting of 4 regiments) was chosen by Gen. Emory to advance across the pike. To the right of the 8th Vermont was the 160th New York, 12th Connecticut and 47th Pennsylvania. The 8th Vermont (164 officers and men) faced parts of Maj. Gen. John B. Gordon’s Division that included regiments from Louisiana, Virginia and North Carolina.



Colonel Stephen Thomas, 8th Vermont
Image Credit: Library of Congress

The Fight for the Flags

Regiments carried both the National and State Flags into battle and the “color bearers” would lay their lives down to maintain possession of the flag. These banners played an important role in battle as they helped to maintain regimental organization and became a beacon soldiers rallied around during the thickest of combat.

One Vermonter recalled: *“Suddenly a mass of rebels confronted the flags, and with hoarse shouts demanded their surrender. Defiant shouts went back. “Never!” “Never!”*

Another member of the regiment described the scene: *“the enemy, with deafening yells, were moving swiftly in*

..Yet the sudden rush of the enemy from every direction, in their yellowish suits, breaking through even the short intervals between the commands, forced each regiment to fight its own battle; and so the Eighth Vermont was practically alone for a time, - and who can count such moments? - as the swarming enemy broke upon it with almost resistless fury.”

So savage was the struggle that one of the Vermonters recalled: *“Men seemed more like demons than human beings as they struck fiercely at each other with clubbed muskets and bayonets.”*

The Sacrifice

During this struggle three color bearers were killed, but ultimately the flags were saved. Thomas’ brigade was decimated. Out of the 1,500 officers and men who went into the fight, it lost approximately 1,060; or over 70 percent. The 8th Vermont lost 110 killed, wounded and captured out of 164 (68 percent), including 13 of its 16 officers.

But the sacrifice had not been in vain. Their desperate holding action delayed the Confederate attack nearly 30 minutes. These precious minutes were used by the rest of the Union army to prepare for the Confederate attack coming their way.

The Reunions



Sheridan’s Veterans Reunion at Belle Grove 1883
Image Credit: USAMHI

Sheridan’s Veterans returned to the Valley in 1883 & 1885.

In 1883 Gen. William Emory, commander of the 19th Corps, took Col. Thomas by the hand and said with much feeling:

“Thomas, I never gave an order in my life that cost me so much pain as it did to order you across the pike that morning. I never expected to see you again.”

Herbert Hill was 16 when he enlisted in the 8th Vermont in 1862, and thus was 18 when he fought at Cedar Creek. Hill decided to honor his lost comrades, and the service of his entire regiment, by commissioning two monuments; one for 3rd Winchester and other here at Cedar Creek.

The 8th Vermont Monument



Image: 8th Vermont Monument
Image Credit: NPS

Dedicated in 1885, the monument marks where the three color bearers were killed defending their flags. Hill explains the symbolism behind the Cedar Creek monuments design:

“The solid block of Vermont marble, which we are assembled today to dedicate, was purposely carved and fashioned on three sides in rough to represent the savage and peculiar feature of that awful struggle. It represents the regiment as it was surrounded at one time on three sides by an excited foe, fresh from their great victory over Crook’s Corps. It represents the three color bearers who were shot down in the terrible hand to hand conflict and who died. It represents three fourths of the commissioned officers killed or wounded. Again, I may say it represents the regiment’s total loss, for almost three fourths of the number of men and officers actually engaged were killed or wounded.”

Another veteran spoke of the monument’s meaning, *“It is but fitting that we...should make pilgrimages to this spot, made sacred by the blood of our brothers in arms, and erect a monument in memory of that sublime courage that characterized the sacrifice of that terrible 19th of October, 1864.”*