

EDWARD CAMPBELL

HISTORICAL SKETCH OF
THE FIFTEENTH
REGIMENT, NEW JERSEY
VOLUNTEERS

Edward Campbell

**Historical sketch of the Fifteenth
Regiment, New Jersey Volunteers**

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Edward Livingston Campbell

Historical sketch of the Fifteenth Regiment, New Jersey Volunteers / First Brigade, First Division, Sixth Corps

SKETCH

Every regiment of soldiers has a character of its own. This "character" is the sum of the elements of individual character, and the circumstances affecting its organization and management.

The Fifteenth Regiment New Jersey Volunteers was organized at Flemington. It was recruited in the "hill country" of the State – three companies from Sussex, two each from Warren, Hunterdon and Morris, and one from Somerset. There being no large cities in this district, it was composed almost wholly of "freeholders" or the sons of freeholders – young men who were well known in the communities from which they came, who had a good name at home to adorn or lose, and friends at home to feel a pride in their good behavior or suffer shame at the reverse. They were an educated and intelligent class of men, many of them of liberal education and in course of training for the higher walks of business or professional life. They were men of a high tone of moral character and of that sturdy and tenacious patriotism which the history of every country, and especially of our own, shows to reside more especially in the fixed population connected with the soil as its owners or tillers. Reared in the mountain air they were generally of vigorous and healthy physique. The writer saw much of Union soldiers during four years of service – regulars, volunteers and militia – and hopes he may be permitted to say, without invidious comparison, that this regiment was marked for the high intellectual and moral character of its enlisted men. Those accustomed to the management and handling of troops know what this means on the battle field and in active campaign. It was largely officered with men who had already seen a year of active service, and who subjected it at once to a rigid discipline.

It was mustered into service on the 25th of August, 1862. Two days later it moved to "the front," at the perilous moment when Pope and Lee were in their death-grapple about Bull Run. Pope being defeated, and the rebels marching for Pennsylvania, the capital was to be more completely fortified on the west and north, and prepared for possible attack. The first duty assigned the regiment was to erect fortifications at Tenallytown, Md., at which they toiled day and night for about one month. On the 30th of September it proceeded to join the victorious Army of the Potomac on the battle-field of Antietam, and, by special request of the corps, division and brigade commanders, was assigned to the First Brigade, First Division, Sixth Corps – the already-veteran "First Jersey Brigade." It afforded much gratification and a home-like feeling, to be brigaded with five other regiments of the same State.

Whilst the Army of the Potomac was being re-fitted and supplied for the fall campaign, the regiment enjoyed, in the midst of picket and other duties, a much-needed month of opportunity for drill and discipline at Bakersville, Maryland – a short time, as all experience will attest, to convert into "soldiers" a thousand men fresh from the untrammelled freedom of civil life, strangers to the rigor of military discipline, the profession of arms, and the art of war. How industriously, willingly, and effectively that month was employed, the subsequent history of the regiment fully attests.

From this time forward, to the close of the war, its history is that of the famous "Sixth Corps" – than which, probably, no corps ever did more hard fighting and effective service, or achieved a more enviable fame.

Its official fighting record, as made up by the Adjutant-General of the State, is as follows:

Fredericksburg, Va., Dec. 13 and 14, 1862; Fredericksburg, Va., May 3, 1863; Salem Heights, Va., May 3 and 4, 1863; Franklin's Crossing, Va., June 6 to 14, 1863; Gettysburg, Pa., July 2 and 3, 1863; Fairfield, Pa., July 5, 1863; Funktown, Md., July 10, 1863; Rappahannock Station, Va., Oct. 12, 1863; Rappahannock Station, Va., Nov. 7, 1863; Mine Run, Va., Nov. 30, 1863; Wilderness, Va., May 5 to 7, 1864; Spottsylvania, Va., May 8 to 11, 1864; Spottsylvania C.H., Va., May 12 to 16, 1864; North and South Anna River, May 24, 1864; Hanover C.H., Va., May 29, 1864; Tolopotomy Creek, Va., May 30 and 31, 1864; Cold Harbor, Va., June 1 to 11, 1864; Before Petersburg, Va., June 16 to 22, 1864; Weldon Railroad, Va., June 23, 1864; Snicker's Gap, Va., July 18, 1864; Strasburg, Va., Aug. 15, 1864; Winchester, Va., Aug. 17, 1864; Charlestown, Va., Aug. 21, 1864; Opequan, Va., Sept. 19, 1864; Fisher's Hill, Va., Sept. 21 and 22, 1864; New Market, Va., Sept. 24, 1864; Mount Jackson, Va., Sept. 25, 1864; Cedar Creek and Middletown, Va., Oct. 19, 1864; Hatcher's Run, Va., Feb. 5, 1865; Fort Steedman, Va., March 25, 1865; Capture of Petersburg, Va., April 2, 1865; Sailors' Creek, Va., April 6, 1865; Farmville, Va., April 7, 1865; Lee's Surrender, (Appomattox, Va.,) April 9, 1865.

In the operations and battles of a large army or corps, a single regiment is so swallowed up in the general mass; its movements and conduct, under fire and out of range, are so intermingled with those of many others, that, to write the history of one is to write that of the army or corps as a whole. This would take volumes; it cannot be done in these brief notes. It must be assumed that the glowing pages which record the battles of the Rebellion are familiar to all; and surely he is a doubtful patriot who has not followed them with deep and absorbing interest. We can here only glance at the regiment at some of those points in its career at which it was in some way distinguished from the general mass, by position, or by special acts of endurance and courage.

It received its baptism of fire at the disastrous battle of Fredericksburg, December 13th, 1862. On the morning of the 12th, the division crossed the Rappahannock at "Franklin's Crossing," below the town, and advanced over the broad plain toward the high ground beyond, under cover of a dense fog, to "find the enemy," whose position, below the town, could not be seen – the Fifteenth on the right of the line. Just before reaching "Deep Run," the enemy discovered the advance, and opened with their heavy guns from the Heights to the right and front. The long line of a full regiment did not waver in the least, though new to the field of battle, and saluted suddenly, for the first time, with the terrifying explosions of shells from guns of large calibre. Carefully observed, they seemed to be nerved and animated by the presence of danger. Patriotic resolve and high moral courage – which had brought them to the field – mantled to their brows. Their commander then and ever after knew and trusted his command. A few men were wounded, but none killed, as the writer remembers. Arrived at the ravine, it was permitted to remain under its cover during the balance of the day, whilst a large army was getting into position, and plans of attack matured. Before light on the morning of the 13th, it was moved out of the ravine and silently deployed as a skirmish line, under cover of the darkness and fog, so near to the rebel skirmish line as to distinctly hear their conversation. Such close contact, face to face with an armed enemy, gave rise to thoughts and emotions new to them, and the gradual lifting of the darkness and fog was watched with anxious faces; but not a man showed signs of flinching. At the coming of light their sharp and obstinate skirmish fire opened the first battle in which they took part. The memorable conflict of the day swept chiefly to the right and left of their long line, but involved four of the left companies, which participated in the charge at that point with the Fourth and Twenty-third, and suffered serious loss. During the following night the drum-corps carried rations from the trains, several miles away, across the river, and distributed them along the line, replenishing the exhausted haversacks – a hard night's work, and a kind of drumming for which they felt they had not enlisted; but they had new lessons in music yet to learn. In the morning the regiment was relieved from its advanced position by the One Hundred and Twenty-first New York, under a galling fire. The battle was over, however, and the army re-crossed the river.

The regiment went into camp near by, at White Oak Church, and, after participating in the fruitless expedition known as Burnside's "Mud March," spent a dismal winter. Typhoid fever, the enemy which no army can conquer, broke out with distressing virulence, and a considerable number died of disease. In every regiment there is a somewhat uniform number of constitutions which cannot resist the privations, hardships, excitements and exposures of vigorous warfare. These must be eliminated by death and permanent disability. In some cases the process is gradual; in others, sudden and rapid, as was the case with the Fifteenth, owing to its being suddenly taken from civil life and thrust at once into the severest service, sustained by excitements and courage until the campaign was over, and then dropped into a muddy camp in very inclement weather. It was ever afterward free from sickness to a marked degree.

In the May following came the "Chancellorsville" campaign under Hooker. The part assigned to the Sixth Corps was to take the Heights of Fredericksburg, and then strike the enemy in flank and rear, and unite with the main army, which crossed the river at the upper fords. Crossing the river at the same place as before, on the morning of the 3d of May, the Fifteenth was placed on the extreme left of the corps line, to support a battery, and, with the balance of the brigade, to hold in check a large force of the enemy formed on his right, to strike the corps in flank and rear, as it attacked the Heights, which was effectively done by a firm stand, though with considerable loss. The balance of the corps having carried the Heights by a gallant charge, it marched through the town, over the Heights, and up the plank road to Salem Church, a few miles from Chancellorsville. Here it encountered a large part of the rebel army, diverted to its front after a successful checking of Hooker. A determined assault was delivered, but failed to drive them from their well-chosen position. The Fifteenth charged gallantly through a wood, pushed the enemy some distance before them, and held the position until ordered to retire about dark, the general attack having failed of its purpose. The night was spent in caring for and removing the wounded. It is thought the Fifteenth was one of the very few regiments which succeeded in getting off all their wounded, which was mainly due here, as afterward, to one of the most brave and faithful chaplains, who was ever with his men, in battle as in camp, and serving them with sleepless and tireless vigilance. The next day was spent in constant manœuvering before a rapidly concentrating enemy, and during the night the corps was ordered to re-cross the river, at Banks' Ford. After another day spent in drawing the artillery and pontoon trains through the mud to the high ground, it returned to its old camp, after the loss of many of its bravest and best men and officers.

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