

“The Largest Men We Have Seen”: The Twenty-Seventh Indiana Infantry, 1861-64

any regiments in the American Civil War are reflected upon in a positive light for their heroism and self-sacrifice, yet perhaps none is more deserving of such glorified remembrance than the Twenty-Seventh Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment. Comprised of around 1,181 officers, privates, and young musicians from numerous south-central Indiana counties, the Twenty-Seventh answered President Abraham Lincoln’s call to arms and began serving for the Union in September of 1861.¹ This unusually tall group of men intimidated, and at the same time eclipsed in height, the enemy regiments in the cornfields at Antietam, en route to discovering the lost orders of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. This chance occurrence subsequently led to a Union victory on the Maryland battlefield and potentially altered the course of the conflict. In addition to providing a thorough historical account of the Twenty-Seventh Indiana Infantry, the intent of this paper, aided by the use of personal letters, newspapers, military correspondence, and secondary texts, is to acknowledge the regiment’s illustrious lore and the contributions it made to the Union victory.

The Twenty-Seventh Indiana Infantry ultimately proved to be a truly unique and particularly successful regiment for the Union army. Recruitment commenced in 1861 after Lincoln’s plea for more manpower and also in coordination with the Union loss at the first Battle of Bull Run, which contributed heavily to the strong anti-Confederate sentiment present in the regiment.² The Twenty-Seventh was divided

into 11 companies, each representing a different Indiana county. In addition to native-born Hoosiers, students attending Indiana schools from another state or those visiting the state were also permitted to join the Twenty-Seventh Indiana.³ The regiment was not culturally diverse; E.R. Brown, a member of Company C recalled, "One of our companies had such a preponderance of German-speaking men in it that we called it our Dutch Koompany. Yet most of these young men who spoke the English language brokenly, had been born in the United States."⁴ As the regiment formed, it became clear that it had developed an insatiable appetite for victory and a deep sense of patriotism for both the Union and the state of Indiana.

The Twenty-Seventh saw volunteers of many trades and professions. Though a substantial majority of the volunteers from the rural Indiana counties were farmers, other occupations included tailors, clockmakers, carpenters, ministers, painters, blacksmiths, millers, merchants, and stonemasons.⁵ The large quantity of farmers going off to war, one might think, would lead to a blemish on the local economy due to a lack of manpower. But by the time many of the volunteers had joined the regiment their wheat crop had been harvested, allowing them to leave for a war which they suspected would conclude in a matter of weeks or months.⁶ E.R. Brown remembered there were a few physicians in the regiment capable of helping the sick or injured, and men of other trades were able to specifically help the regiment with needs according to their occupation.⁷

On average, many of the men who volunteered for the Twenty-Seventh were around 18 or 19 years of age. The number of men serving into their twenties and thirties was remarkably fewer than that of their younger counterparts. A substantial number of the 18-year-old volunteers were farmers. Some owned their own property, while others assisted their fathers on the family farm.⁸ The fact that many of the young males did not own property made the lack of manpower less detrimental to area farms. In addition to youth, the Twenty-Seventh also possessed a shared physical characteristic that gave them an advantage over enemy regiments.

Nicknamed the "Giants" by enemy citizens and soldiers, the Twenty-Seventh was the tallest regiment in the entire Union army, standing at an average of five feet-nine inches.⁹ Other than being

regarded as the tallest regiment, the Twenty-Seventh also possessed the tallest family and individual soldier in the Union army. At six feet-eleven inches tall, Captain David Cambell Van Buskirk eclipsed every soldier he came into contact with. In fact, the members of the Van Buskirk family, who hailed from Bloomington, Indiana, were the tallest fighting family unit in the Union army at an average height of six feet three and a half inches.¹⁰

Specifically, Company F of the Twenty-Seventh was composed of particularly tall individuals. After seeing David Cambell Van Buskirk for the first time, Peter Kop, a Frenchman living in Bloomington in 1861, devised a plan to recruit the tallest company in the Union by denying admittance to all those under five feet ten inches.¹¹ Though this feat was not met, around 80 men in the company of over 100 were estimated to exceed six feet in height,¹² including the five Van Buskirk men and Peter Kop himself, who was six feet four and a half inches.¹³ One newspaper in Indianapolis claimed Company F was “composed of the largest men we have seen from any section of the State. The Second Lieutenant is a whale, but some others are whales too, but a trifle smaller.”¹⁴

In addition to Kop, the regiment possessed leadership that was effective and intelligent. Silas Colgrove, a man with an imposing demeanor and an especially foul mouth,¹⁵ was the Twenty-Seventh’s Colonel for the entire duration of the regiment’s existence. In 1856, he was elected into the Indiana House of Representatives as a Republican, and subsequently served as a captain for the Eighth Indiana Infantry before being appointed as Colonel of the Twenty-Seventh.¹⁶ The men of the regiment respected Colgrove. His longevity as Colonel was testimony that his men were fond of him and that his tasks were accomplished effectively.

The Twenty-Seventh participated in many significant battles under Colonel Colgrove and played key roles in such conflicts. Shortly after the regiment formed, all eleven companies convened on Camp Morton on September 10, 1861 and then left for Washington, D.C. by train four days later. Having endured many months of sleepless nights, insect infestations, and poor camp conditions,¹⁷ the men in the regiment were anxious to join the fighting wherever it might have been. After crossing the Potomac River, on May 25, 1862, some eight

months after leaving Indiana, the Twenty-Seventh saw its first major fighting at Winchester, Virginia. The regiment clashed with rebel companies from Virginia and kept their composure under the guidance of Colonel Colgrove. The first death of the Twenty-Seventh occurred in this encounter when Jacob Micheal, a member of Company A, was shot in the forehead and killed instantly.¹⁸ By the end of this first taste of battle, the regiment had suffered five deaths, and sixty-two men had been taken prisoner.¹⁹ Substantially outnumbered, the Union suffered a setback at Winchester, reflecting the hardships the entire Union army would suffer during 1862. Perhaps luckily for the Twenty-Seventh, this grim reminder of the realities of war would be the only major conflict it would be involved with until the end of the summer, giving the regiment a chance to regroup from its losses.

Most of the men in the Twenty-Seventh who would eventually be captured as prisoners of war were taken during the Spring of 1862 after battles in the Shenandoah Valley.²⁰ A majority of the captured men were detained on Belle Isle in Virginia. The conditions at this prison and comparable prisons were egregious to say the least. Prisoners had to endure atrocities such as spoiled food, unsafe drinking water, exposure to the elements, and severe outbreaks of scurvy and diarrhea.²¹ Many of the aforementioned Van Buskirk brothers were prisoners on Belle Isle. Micheal Henry Van Buskirk, recalled the inhumane conditions, writing, "This morning while they were giving us rations they seemed scared. They began to throw the bread over the fence at us by the wagon loads, just like feeding hogs."²² A few days later, after not receiving a healthy meal at the camp, he recalled, "Our slop for some cause having failed to come around. I guess it was too cool to get flies sufficient to thicken it."²³ This seems to suggest that insects and vermin ran rampant, even finding their way into the prisoners' already depleted rations. A civilian visitor who visited a similar camp was appalled at the conditions he saw, noting, "They truly are in destitute condition. Some are sick. John M. Brower of Company H is very sick. I have sent to Washington, D.C. to Mr. Dennis to send some things for their immediate relief."²⁴

Despite the deplorable conditions prisoners in the Twenty-Seventh and other regiments had to endure, only about a dozen succumbed to the elements, while most of those released went back to

the regiment. This act required the utmost bravery and was indicative of the type of men who served in the Twenty-Seventh. Though not as ravaged by prisons as other regiments, the Twenty-Seventh was certainly represented in the masses of Civil War prison camps and found a way to recover from the vacancies the missing prisoners created.

After Union losses at Winchester and Cedarville in 1862, the regiment was reflecting the viewpoint of the Union: a general attitude of pessimism over the potential outcome of the war. As part of the Union army assigned to prevent Confederate General Robert E. Lee's Confederates from invading the north, the Twenty-Seventh arrived outside Fredrick, Maryland on September 13, 1862. While relaxing under some shade trees, Corporal Barton Warren Mitchell, Private William H. Hostetter and First Sergeant John M. Bloss, each of the Twenty-Seventh, found a group of letters under a tree that would ultimately prove to be specific orders from General Lee to Major General D.H. Hill, commanding division.²⁵ In these orders, Lee gave specific locations for the whereabouts of his army, telling his generals, "The commands of Generals Jackson, McLaws, and Walker, after accomplishing the objects for which they have been detached, will join the main body of the army at Boonsborough or Hagerstown."²⁶ Upon realizing the significance of their discovery, the men effectively took the orders to their superiors, and the document eventually reached Major General George McClellan. Overjoyed with the discovery of his Confederate counterpart's specific orders, McClellan exclaimed, "Here is a paper with which if I cannot defeat Bobby Lee, I will be willing to go home!"²⁷

Armed with the intentions of the enemy, McClellan calculated a direct assault on Lee's forces, rather than having to guess where his men would be. The ensuing collision of forces would result in the Battle of Antietam. It was here that the Twenty-Seventh added to their growing legacy. At one strategic point known as "the cornfield", the men of the Twenty-Seventh fought with every ounce of courage and fortitude they possessed. Though they suffered heavy casualties, along with nearly every other participating regiment in the battle, they effectively held back the advancing Confederates. After the fighting had ceased, E.R. Brown claimed, "It seems a miracle that anyone should still remain unhurt."²⁸ Indeed, the regiment paid a heavy sacrifice for

their work at Antietam, but eventually learned that they and other Union regiments had been successful at staving off a Confederate invasion of the North. One Indiana soldier recalled, “Gen. Gordon rode up in the corn (and) complimented us very highly as brave soldiers having done our duty, & the 27th as being one of the best regiments in the service.”²⁹ Though the regiment saw 41 of its members killed and 168 wounded, it still contributed heavily to the first major Union victory of the war, and perhaps to the final outcome of the conflict as well.

When the members of the Twenty-Seventh found General Lee’s specific orders, they most likely had little knowledge that they would trigger a chain of events that would ultimately lead to the Confederacy’s demise. Before Antietam, the Union had not won a major conflict, and the morale of the troops reflected that. General Lee appeared to be destined to invade the North and possibly end the conflict with a Confederate victory.

The discovery of the lost orders allowed General McClellan to confidently fight Lee and hold him back from a Northern invasion. A few years after the battle, McClellan recalled:

On or about the 13th of September, 1862,-just before the battles of South Mountain and Antietam-there was handed to me by a member of my staff a copy of one of General Lee’s orders of march...which order developed General Lee’s intended operations for the next few days, and was of very great service to me in enabling me to direct the movements of my own troops accordingly.³⁰

From this, one can assume that McClellan recognized the Twenty-Seventh as very important to the eventual outcome of the battle. Antietam itself held dire consequences for each side. For the South, a victory was needed to ensure that European powers would recognize it as a separate entity from the Union. This would be critical in establishing trade for goods the South desperately needed. Without proper recognition from other countries, the Confederacy could not sustain itself as a nation. In addition to the defense of the North, a victory at Antietam was also crucial for slaves inhabiting the south, as President

Lincoln was waiting for an opportune victory to announce his Emancipation Proclamation—essentially freeing all enslaved people in the Confederacy.³¹ Had Lee's lost orders not been recovered, the entire outcome of the battle, and possibly the war, could have been altered significantly.

Still, many choose to downplay the significance of the discovery of Lee's orders. After all, to refer to the Twenty-Seventh as heroes after Antietam is to assume that the Confederacy would have been victorious had no such documents been discovered. It is likely that McClellan would not have moved his forces with quite as much confidence, and thus could have been defeated at the hands of a strong army commanded by Lee. This, however, is purely speculation and obviously, it is impossible for one to discover what this potential outcome would be. Perhaps one single act of luck is not enough to proclaim a group of men as heroic, but their collected efforts on the battlefield at Antietam can be combined with their subsequent participation in other major battles.

In addition to Antietam, the Twenty-Seventh was also represented in the significant battles of Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. One Indianapolis newspaper reported of Chancellorsville, "The 27th gained the highest credit for its gallant conduct. Gen. Sickles said it was the best regiment he ever saw although it was not in his corps."³² It was during this three day battle that the regiment saw some of its heaviest fighting. The Twenty-Seventh received many accolades for taking the majority of the Confederate assault and keeping their composure under the heavy fire.³³ Though the Union suffered a defeat at Chancellorsville, the Twenty-Seventh proved their courageousness by fighting heavily for many hours and for being one of the final remaining regiments on the field. Still, at the Battle of Gettysburg in July of 1863, the Twenty-Seventh displayed competence and fortitude on the field, and once again took part in some of the heaviest fighting in the battle.³⁴ The presence of the Twenty-Seventh on the Union's right flank pushed the Confederates into an unwanted position, which subsequently led to their loss of Culp's Hill, a strategic point in the battle. Ordered to charge, the regiment headed straight for the Confederates in the woods, and suffered heavy losses. Despite this, they managed to hold back the rebels and were again recognized for their courage dis-

played on the battlefield. Most notable was the fact that 110 members of the regiment were killed or wounded out of the 339 engaged, which meant that nearly one-third of those who participated in the battle suffered a casualty of some kind.³⁵ Gettysburg would be the last major conflict the Twenty-Seventh would participate in, as the Confederacy struggled to survive after Gettysburg.

As the war was in its waning days in 1864, the Twenty-Seventh participated in minor battles in Georgia, and gained attention for their excellent work in combat. At Resaca in May of 1864, the regiment broke through the enemy lines and captured a significant number of prisoners, a feat which ultimately earned Captain Thomas J. Box a Medal of Honor, the highest recognition given to a soldier.³⁶ The regiment saw its last service at the Battle of New Hope Church on May 25, 1864. The Twenty-Seventh officially disbanded in September of that year, thus bringing an end to arguably one of the most successful and storied regiments to participate in the Civil War. At the end of the war, thirteen percent of the regiment's original members, about 158 men, lost their lives directly in combat, while 706 were a casualty at some point during the war.³⁷ The heavy casualties reflect an aggressive and engaged regiment with men who possessed fortitude and bravery. These numbers also display the cost of being involved in many integral points of the war.

On an individual level, the Twenty-Seventh produced men that would go on to lead very successful lives. As previously mentioned, Captain Thomas J. Box of Company D was awarded the Medal of Honor after successfully capturing a rebel flag at the Battle of Resaca. At the time of the awarding of the Medal of Honor to Box in 1865, it was the premiere achievement one could receive.³⁸ He remains the only member of the Twenty-Seventh to win an individual award for valor on the battlefield.

In addition to Box, Captain John McKnight Bloss, the man who discovered Lee's lost orders, gained later notoriety in his lifetime. At the time of the Battle of Antietam, he was known for his intelligence, which is evident by his decision to quickly take the orders to those in command. Eventually, he worked his way up through the ranks to command Company F of the Twenty-Seventh.³⁹ After the war, he became the Indiana superintendent of schools for a short time before

moving to the west coast and becoming president of the present-day Oregon State University.

Moreover, the aforementioned David Cambell Van Buskirk, the tallest Yankee soldier, became known throughout the country for his massive measurements. He was one of the many men who were captured at the Battle of Winchester, and was subsequently toured around the South to different prisons as if he were a freak show. While many men in the regiment suffered through ghastly conditions in the prison camps, Van Buskirk was treated like a king and fed profusely in hopes that he would draw crowds so that the Confederates could make money. At his heaviest, he was supposedly in excess of four hundred pounds.⁴⁰

Clearly, the Twenty-Seventh Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment proved to a decisive factor in the eventual outcome of the Civil War. The men played integral roles in the major conflicts of Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, and Antietam. The regiment even found General Robert E. Lee's lost orders at the latter, which subsequently led to a chain of events that ultimately reversed the momentum the Confederacy had into the Union's hands. Moreover, many slaves were rescued from bondage as a direct result of the victory at Antietam and Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. This storied regiment, full of the tallest men in the army, was a positive example for other regiments based on the courage and valor displayed at every battle they participated in. The country owes the Twenty-Seventh Indiana a debt of gratitude for helping to restore the Union, and for existing as models of what an effective, capable, and competent regiment should have been.

Notes

- 1 Wilbur D. Jones Jr. *The 27th Indiana Infantry: Giants in the Cornfield* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Publishing Company, 1997), 24.
- 2 E.R. Brown. *The Twenty-Seventh Indiana Volunteer Infantry in the War of the Rebellion 1861-1865: First Division 12th and 20th Corps.* (Gaithersburg, MD: Butternut Press, 1899), 14-15.
- 3 Ibid., 14.
- 4 Ibid., 22.
- 5 Steve D. Russell. "The 27th Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment: Company D, 'Lawrence Rifles.'" <<http://www.geocities.com/Pentagon/Barracks/3627/companyd.html>> (October 7, 2005).
- 6 Brown, 20.
- 7 Ibid., 20.
- 8 Russell (October 7, 2005).
- 9 Jones Jr., 210.
- 10 Ibid., 212.
- 11 Ibid., 212.
- 12 Brown, 22.
- 13 Jones Jr., 212.
- 14 *Indianapolis, IN Journal*, August 16, 1861.
- 15 Jones Jr. 119.
- 16 Ibid., 252.
- 17 Brown, 113-116.
- 18 Ibid., 145.
- 19 Ibid., 159.
- 20 Jones Jr., 137.
- 21 Ibid., 143.
- 22 Ibid., 144.
- 23 Ibid., 148.
- 24 W. Wilson. Letter to the Editor. *Indianapolis, IN Journal*. October 6, 1862.
- 25 Jones Jr., 228.
- 26 "General R.E. Lee. Lee's Special Order 191" <http://www.nps.gov/anti/ordr_191.htm> (October 29, 2005).
- 27 "Lee's Lost Orders." <<http://www.swcivilwar.com/LeeMarylandLostOrders.html>> (October 29, 2005).
- 28 Brown, 249.

- 29 Jones Jr., 14.
- 30 Brown, 230-231.
- 31 “Battlefield Information” <<http://www.nps.gov/anti/battle.htm>> (November 2, 2005).
- 32 *Indianapolis, IN Journal*, May 11, 1863.
- 33 Jones Jr. 67-69.
- 34 Ibid. 71-73.
- 35 Brown, 403.
- 36 Jones Jr., 77.
- 37 Ibid., 244.
- 38 Ibid. 254.
- 39 Ibid. 233.
- 40 Ibid. 250.