

A young man, at his prime, full of promise and ambition, stood before an Army recruiter on a fine August summer's day to sign a pledge to serve faithfully and obediently obey his superior officers in the defense of his country. Only the thin veil of ignorance born out of naïveté protected him from realizing he was getting himself involved in the most inhuman business of homo sapiens had every invented; a potentially fatal contest where being in the wrong place at the wrong time could result in being mangled, maimed or dead. At nineteen, Alonzo H. Field had his entire life ahead of him. Any dream he ever had was still a unfulfilled possibility. But his passion at the moment was directed exclusively towards "joining up" with all the other like minded young men around him before this civil war that had broken out was over and he lost his chance for glory, excitement and adventure. It was too early in the shooting war for veterans, who returned from their enlightening tour of duty, with empty sleeves or trouser legs, or disfigured faces and maimed bodies or life long impaired health to talk him out of going. He probably would not have listened anyway, youth being what youth is.

Alonzo was born May 23, 1843 in New Haven. <sup>[1]</sup> He was the only son of James Field (1798-1862) and Sarissa Finney (1801-1863) who went to fight in the American Civil War. <sup>[2]</sup> Alonzo had nine brothers and sisters: Jawletta F. (Julette) (1823-1863); Emily P. (1824-1842); Lamira P. (Lanisa) (1828-1858); Darleski C. (1832-1906); Sarissa Mirissa (1833-1919); James (1835-1900); Mary E. (1831-1892); George D. (1848-1860); and Field Ella I (Fidelia) (1845-1928). <sup>[3]</sup> Alonzo was not married when he enlisted, therefore, he left no offspring to carry on the family name.

He was only six in 1850 living in the small village of New Haven. He belonged to a large farming family. James, his fifty-two year old father, was doing quite well with his farming despite the fact that he had difficulty supplying himself with free manual labor to help with the workload. The original farm was located on what now is called the Dog Team Road, just off Route Seven in New Haven ( House #19 on District 8 map, page 241 in Farnsworth's History of New Haven) <sup>[4]</sup> James' first four children were all daughters. James, his first born son, did not arrive until about 1835. His second boy did not come along until around 1840 when George was born. Alonzo was the third son born about

1843. In 1850, only James was anywhere near old enough to assist his father, but that help was limited because he also attended school full time. James was forced to have a hired man, forty year old Lucas Bassett, to make the \$2,200 farm operation work. <sup>[5]</sup>

By 1860, James had built the homestead up to be worth \$4,000. Only seventeen year old Alonzo had stuck with his father on the farm. James' family had shrunk to just himself, his wife, Sarissa, and two of his ten children - Alonzo and Ellen. <sup>[6]</sup> Then, after August, 1862, there were only three Field's left in on the farm. Alonzo had decided to cease being a spectator to the events of the Civil War, so he traded his pitchfork for a rifled musket. It did not seem like a coincidence that Alonzo enlisted just two weeks after his father died on July 28, 1862 of consumption. <sup>[7]</sup>

Alonzo did not join the Second Vermont until August, 1862 when the Regiment was heading for Fortress Monroe. He had missed some of the action the Second Vermont had been a part of: First Bull Run; Siege of Yorktown; Lee's Mills; Seven Days; Savage Station; Malvern Hill. There was still plenty of war left for the young Private. He had Crampton's Gap; Antietam; Fredericksburg; Marye's Heights; Gettysburg; the Wilderness; Spotsylvania and Cold Harbor to look forward to. About the only major events he missed were Petersburg and Appomattox. <sup>[8]</sup>

He enlisted on August 13, 1862 in New Haven, Vermont for three years at the encouragement of the Selectmen of the town. He was only nineteen years old. He was five feet nine inches tall. He had a fair complexion for a farmer. His eyes were dark and so was his hair. He was a native of Addison, Vermont. It was unclear whether he meant the county or the town. <sup>[9]</sup> Private Field officially became a member of Company K, Second Vermont Infantry on September 5, 1862 at Burlington, Vermont. There he received his \$25 bounty and \$4 premium payment along with his new woolen suit of clothes to wear. <sup>[10]</sup> In October, he was paid one month's pay in advance. <sup>[11]</sup> July 3, 1863, eight months later, Private Field had his first encounter with bad luck. He became ill at Gettysburg and was admitted to the General Hospital in Baltimore. <sup>[12]</sup> He ended up being sent to the General Hospital in Brattleboro, Vermont for treatment until February 19,

1864 when he was transferred to Bedloe's Island in New York. <sup>[13]</sup> From there, Private Field was returned to the ranks in time to participate in the major battles of the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House and Cold Harbor before his last engagement at Opequon.

A lull in Federal activity occurred for the Army of the Shenandoah after its fight with Early's forces at Charles Town where, according to one source, the Vermonters alone expended 56,000 rounds of ammunition. Local legend had it that, lacking horses or mules, the Green Mountain Boys improvised by using cows to haul more ammunition to the front. To everyone's surprise, Grant made an appearance at Sheridan's headquarters to express his concern about the lack of aggression on the part of the Union troops. Rumors buzzed about camp as to how soon after Grant's visit they would be in action. Three days passed after Grant left camp, until the time Sheridan had his army on the move across Opequon Creek.

The battle that ensued was called the Battle of Opequon or Third Winchester. It began in the predawn of September 19, 1864. From the start, the infantry found it difficult to advance through the narrow defile that Sheridan had chosen to move through on his way to attack the Confederates. As troops attempted to advance, the wounded were trying to retreat and the two way traffic in the confined space resulted in a terrible jam so that no one could hardly move. In the process of moving forward towards the fight, the Vermonters were witness to the fate of those wounded and being attended to by the surgeons. They saw the doctors at work with their gleaming knives and saws standing in pools of blood while other mangled men awaited the attention of the surgeons.

Finally, at mid-day, Sheridan had everything in readiness for a grand charge. The Vermont Brigade was on the left of the Union line. From the start, the attack did not go well. Confederate artillery pounded the Union center creating great chaos. On the Union left, regiments attacked in uncoordinated fashion. The Vermonter had to push through a swamp to their front. As they struggled through the boggy terrain, to their right, at short pistol range, appeared an entire regiment of Confederates. They drew up in a line along

the edge of the swamp and directed their enfilading fire at the straining Vermonters. The carnage was intense. The trapped Green Mountain Boys floundered on knowing their only hope was to get to the relative safety of the evergreens beyond the swamp. Once under the crest of a hill, above the deadly hollow, the Brigade dug in. They held their position against Confederate assaults, finding shelter wherever they could. One Vermonter from the Eighth Regiment described the situation:

"....A desolating fire of musketry sweeps across the exposed ground we occupy, the bullets sounding like angry hornets, as they cut the air so close to the face as to be felt....word is passed along that Charles Blood is killed. Another is wounded.... Corporal James Black settles slowly to the ground.... Sergeant Francis E. Warren is at my side....when a bullet enters the socket of his eye....Next to fall is Edmund Fisher, a man past fifty years of age....Our rifles become so hot and foul from constant and rapid use that we are forced to abandon them and take others from the dead soldiers lying within reach...."

The Union's first assault had failed, but Sheridan quickly planned for a second one. Those who fought at the Opequon never forgot the majesty of the final Federal assault:

"....a long line moving in unison with flags flying and bayonets gleaming in the autumn sunshine....A solid blue line advancing in step, steadily and deliberately, not the disorderly rush of the first charge....carefully aligned by brigades and by divisions, we swept forward into battle."

The Vermont Brigade advanced through a field of tall corn and over a rail fence. Across the open field, the enemy stood waiting to receive the Yankee charge. Colonel Thomas of the Vermont Brigade rode to the front of the battered line, turned, and in the thunderous voice he used on the battlefield called "Boys, if you ever pray, the time to pray has come.

Pray now, remember Ethan Allen and old Vermont, and we'll drive them to hell. Come on, old Vermont!" And with that, Colonel Thomas turned to the enemy and deliberately rode forward. His men, with bayonets fixed, gave a cheer and soon passed him as they went rolling on into the Rebel lines. With them came the whole of the Federal line. The attack went on, the infantry marching in a resistless wave, cavalry moving from walk to gallop. The Confederates, badly outnumbered, wavered then broke completely. Third Winchester ended in a total rout, although the numbers did not show it. Most of Early's army got away as night fell. Sheridan's army suffered nearly 5,000 casualties. Some 350 Vermonters were wounded with eighty dead on the field or dying of wounds shortly afterwards. Among the eighty killed in action was Private Field. He died in one of the charges made on September 19 at Opequon or during the interval between them when vicious sniping on both sides occurred. <sup>[14]</sup>

As with all soldiers in the service, there was a settling of accounts at the end of their term of service. For Private Field, it resulted in the Government owing him three months back pay. He owed the Government \$25 advanced bounty and \$52.12 for clothing. <sup>[15]</sup> Seemed like poor Alonzo lost more than he gained.

## NOTES

1. Ancestry.com, Vermont, Vital Records, 1720-1908 for Field Alerrzo H. Field.
2. www.findagrave.com, Memorial #40786631; Ancestry.com, Swanson\_AutoBackup Family Tree for Alonzo H. Field.
3. Ancestry.com, 1850 U.S. Federal Census for James Field; Ibid., Swanson\_AutoBackup Family Tree for Alonzo H. Field.
4. History of New Haven in Vermont by Harold Farnsworth and Robert Rogers, Town of New Haven, 1984, p.241, house #19, District Eight.
5. Ancestry.com, 1850 U.S. Federal Census for James Field.
6. Ibid., 1860 U.S. Federal Census for James Field.
7. Ibid., Vermont, Vital Records, 1720-1908 for James Field.
8. [http://civilwarintheeast.com/2nd\\_vermont](http://civilwarintheeast.com/2nd_vermont).
9. www.fold3.com, Compiled Service Records of Union Soldiers Who Served in Organizations From the State of Vermont. p. 2, image 310733747. Hereinafter referred to as Compiled Service Records.
10. Ibid., Compiled Service Records, p. 3, image 310733750.
11. Ibid., Compiled Service Records, p. 4, image 310733753.
12. Ibid., Compiled Service Records, p. 10, image 310733770.

13. Ibid., Compiled Service Records, p. 16, image 310733788.
14. Full Duty: Vermonters in the Civil War by Howard Coffin, The Countryman Press, Inc., Woodstock, 1993, pp. 298-302.
15. [www.fold3.com](http://www.fold3.com), Compiled Service Records, p. 24, image 310733812.