

“SUMTER HAS FALLEN!” flashed across the telegraph wires on April 13, 1861. Nothing electrified the country like this announcement since the events of the 1770s. Of the thirty-four states in existence on that April morning, no state was as ill prepared for war as Vermont. Rowland E. Robinson of Ferrisburgh wrote: “At the outbreak of the Rebellion, except for the feeble existence of four skeleton regiments, Vermont’s militia was unorganized, the men subject to military service not even being enrolled. Some of the uniformed companies were without arms, others drilled with ancient flint-locks; and the State possessed but five hundred serviceable percussion muskets, and no tents nor camp equipage.”^[1]

April 15, 1861 saw President Lincoln call for 75,000 men to serve three months to aid in enforcing the laws and suppressing the rebellion.^[2] Vermont’s quota was 780 men, the equivalent of one regiment.^[3] Governor Fairbanks immediately ordered all uniformed militia in the State to assemble. There were not enough of the enrolled militia to meet the need, so the Governor called for volunteers to fill the President’s request. On April 19, acting on the orders of the State’s Adjutant General, the field officers of the several militia companies met at Burlington to select what companies raised in the State would be accepted into the First Regiment of Vermont Volunteers. Ten companies were ultimately chosen: Swanton (Company A); Woodstock (Company B); St. Albans (Company C); Bradford (Company D); Cavendish (Company E); Northfield (Company F); Brandon (Company G); Burlington (Company H); Middlebury (Company I); and Rutland (Company K). Colonel John W. Phelps was elected to command. Militia Captain Peter T. Washburn of Woodstock was appointed Lieutenant-Colonel. Among the company officers selected were future Governor, Roswell Farnham and future Medal of Honor recipient, William Y.W. Ripley.^[4]

While the First Vermont Regiment was being raised, the Vermont Legislature met in special session in Montpelier on April 23. Amid great pomp and ceremony, it passed a bill through both houses appropriating the unheard of sum of one million dollars for war expenses, twice the amount originally requested. The amount was so extraordinary at the time that it caught the attention of a New York newspaper which commented: “Vermont has a population of but 300,000, mostly farmers, and yet has made an appropriation of \$1,000,000 to aid in maintaining the stars and stripes. Many have done nobly; but none, resources considered, have equaled this!”^[5] The Legislature did not stop there. The representatives of both houses went on to pass acts providing for: raising, arming and equipping six additional regiments for a period of two years’ service; paying each private \$7 per month pay in addition to the \$13 Federal rate; the relief of volunteers’ families at State expense when hardships were evident; and laying the first war tax of \$.10 on the dollar of the Grand List.^[6] These unique provisions were without precedent in any other state.

While civil and military authorities were busy organizing and deliberating, the general populace of Vermont was also hard at work. Incensed by the news of the fall of Fort Sumter, citizens held meetings throughout the State to express their loyalty to the Union. So many flag raisings were held, that red, white and blue bunting became extremely scarce in stores all over Vermont. Offers of money poured in from everywhere; banks;

private citizens; native Vermonters living in other states; towns; and special societies. At the University of Vermont and Middlebury College, students formed military companies and began drilling. Within a period of three days from May 7, 1861, fifty-six companies of volunteers (approximately 100 men per company) were raised by recruiters throughout Vermont.^[7] Not all of them were immediately needed, but they would be called upon to serve in the very near future.

By April 30, everything the First Vermont needed had been supplied. On May 2, the first ten companies of volunteers were ordered by the Adjutant General of Vermont to report to Rutland for duty. They assembled on the fairgrounds two miles south of the village. Their camp was immediately dubbed Camp Fairbanks. While waiting to be officially mustered-in the service, the troops began learning the arts of living comfortably in a camp setting. They mastered the arts of pitching tents that would withstand heavy winds and how to cook over open fires in the great outdoors. They also had to be taught the skills of a good soldier like guard mounting, answering the surgeon's call and doing fatigue duty and battalion drill.^[8] Among those who found all of this foreign and challenging was Henry Brooks. He, too, had to make the transition from civilian to soldier as he had left his wife, six children and his farm in Bristol to demonstrate his loyalty to the cause of saving the Union.

Henry was a thirty-seven year old farmer from Bristol; an old man by most standards.^[9] He was the son of Cephas Brooks and Lydia Wells. His parents were both residents of Middlebury at the time they married in 1816.^[10] Henry had at least three siblings who could be reliably accounted for. A lack of documentation made it very difficult to uncover even those. There may have been others not discovered. Of those who could be verified were: a brother, Cephas, Junior (1817-1884); two sisters – Martha Irene (1821-1857) and Aurilla (??-1882).^[11] Brother Cephas was the first of the Brooks children to marry. He wedded Mary Robbins (1821-1870) in New Haven, Vermont in 1845.^[12] Three years later, in 1848, he became the first of the Brooks family to be drawn west by the opening of new government owned lands for settlement. By 1849, Junior was an established resident of Sun Prairie, Wisconsin.^[13] The 1850 Federal Census listed he and his wife, Mary, as living on a \$1,300 farm in Dane County.^[14] According to Federal Land Records for August 1, 1846, Cephas Junior had started buying up parcels of Government land when he first purchased forty acres with cash one mile west of the village of Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. On March 1, 1848, he bought two more adjacent parcels for cash. One consisted of 43.74 acres and the other contained 94.65. Two years later, 1850, he bought an additional forty acres from the Government in his final cash sale.^[15] According to a Plat Map of Sun Prairie, Dane County, Wisconsin, Cephas Brooks, Junior ended up owning 258.78 acres of farmland just west of the village of Sun Prairie.^[16]

In 1850, twenty-six year old Henry was living with his father and mother in Bristol on a farm along with his sister, Martha, his wife, Harriet and their two children, George H. (two) and Julia (1/12).^[17] It appeared that while his brother, Cephas, Junior, was buying up land in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, his younger brother, Henry, had married a Middlebury girl named Harriet Cunningham (1829-1907). She was the daughter of Nathan Cunningham and Polly Wright. Henry and Harriet were married in Bristol on August 28,

1848 by a Justice of the Peace.^[18] Undoubtedly, Henry, his new bride and his children were partnering with Henry's father, Cephas, Senior, in running the farm in exchange for a roof over their heads.

By 1860, it seemed that Henry had inherited the farm from his father. It was a timely opportunity for Henry's family was expanding rapidly. Four new members had been born into the clan since 1850. There were now six children for Henry to feed, clothe and shelter. He had three sons: George H. (1847-1920); William S. (1853-1913); and Judson (1855-1885). Then in 1858, Henry and Harriet had twins – a boy named Herbert and a girl named Marcia. Both died young, within several days of each other, in 1863 from an epidemic disease. The couples last child, Carrie, was born in May, 1872. She died at four months of age.^[19] Absent from the Bristol Census for 1860 were two of the eldest members of the Brooks family; Cephas, Senior and his wife, Lydia. Lydia may have died before the Census was taken on July 6, 1860. Due to a lack of documentation for Lydia's life, no evidence of her death date could be found. However, Cephas, Senior's whereabouts was discovered for 1860. He was living in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin on his son's farm! The seventy year old retired farmer had turned the Vermont farm over to his son, Henry, and he had headed west to live with his other son who had a nice farm going in Wisconsin. When the bugles blew, the bands played and the flags waved in the breeze, Henry was the only male Brooks left in Vermont to answer the call. And so he did. On May 2, 1861, Henry skedaddled off to Rutland and joined the First Vermont Regiment of Volunteers.^[20]

In order for an organized and equipped group of volunteers to be accepted into the service of the Union Army, it had to be inspected and approved by a designated representative of the War Department; usually an officer of the regular standing army who had graduated from West Point. The man Washington sent to muster-in the First Vermont was one Lieutenant-Colonel Gabriel Rains of the Fifth United States Infantry. Rains was from North Carolina, one of the states that had seceded from the Union after the fall of Fort Sumter. At the time he was sent to Burlington, Vermont to inspect the newly formed First Vermont Regiment, he still held his commission as an officer in the Union Army. From those who conversed with him after his arrival, it became very obvious to the citizens of the Queen City that Rains' sympathies lay with the Rebel's cause. In fact, Rains was so vocal in his support of the southerners' principles that many leading members of Burlington went to Governor Fairbanks to express their fear that Rains would somehow prevent the regiment from being accepted into the service. The Governor in response asked for a meeting between himself, Rains and Vermont's Adjutant General. Colonel Rains declined the Governor's invitation. Furthermore, he refused to go to Rutland to muster-in the First, citing his orders from Washington to report to Burlington to inspect the Vermonters. Meanwhile, the First Vermont refused to march all the way to Burlington from Camp Fairbanks to be mustered-in. More than two weeks passed while State authorities negotiated with the War Department concerning the stand-off. Finally, Colonel Rains was given orders by Washington to go to Rutland and muster-in the Vermont Regiment. Three months later, Rains resigned his commission in the U.S. Army and entered the Confederate service as chief of the Rebel naval torpedo

service.^[21] Rains was also credited with inventing the land mines used against infantry in combat.

Henry had a number of factors about him that made him a unique volunteer in the Civil War. Besides the fact that he was an old man by most standards for a soldier, and the fact that he had a wife and four children to support at home, there was the fact that he was already a veteran of America's previous wars. Turned out Henry had enlisted as a Wisconsin resident, twenty-three years of age, as a private in the Mexican-American War on July 30, 1847. He served in the 15th Infantry, Company C. He was sick in New Orleans October 25, 1847 and was discharged July 22, 1848.^[22] Now, in 1861, he was volunteering again for his second war!

On May 2, Henry went to Rutland where the First Vermont was encamped, and signed up for three months. According to his Civil War records, he was mustered-in on May 9 and assigned to Company I (the Middlebury company) The same day that Henry was made a private of Company I, the First was loaded onto a twenty car train that took them south to Troy, New York. There a large crowd had gathered to meet the troop train. The Troy Times reported: "The strong, sturdy looks of the men, their ability to withstand hardships, and the entire absence of small men from the ranks, were observed by all. By general acclaim the regiment was pronounced to be the finest ever seen in this section of the country. Every man bore himself like a true soldier and gentleman. We understand there are 100 graduates of colleges in the ranks, besides many men of large business interests and worth in the State."^[23] From Troy, the train moved on to the Big Apple (New York City) a place most of the Vermont farm boys had only heard about. They left the train station in their new grey uniforms (uniforms had not yet been standardized by each side) with the traditional sprig of evergreen in their caps and marched proudly down Broadway to Central Park where they camped for the night. The next afternoon, the First marched to the docks where steamers waited for them to transport them to their duty station at Fort Monroe on the Virginia Peninsula. For most of the Vermonters, this was their first ocean voyage. Consequently, a majority of them spent the entire trip sea sick. Some of the troops were confined to below decks in the hold of the vessel and could not even get to the rails to vomit overboard. On May 13, the steamer hove into view of the walls of Fortress Monroe after a thirty-six hour voyage. The "green" Mountain boys were overjoyed to be back on terra firma.^[24] Eventually, the First was sent to Newport News where they set up their camp called Camp Phelps after their commanding officer, Colonel John W. Phelps. There, for the most part, the men of the First Vermont enjoyed themselves as they relaxed in a clean and well organized camp. The members of the Regiment baked in the sun on the beach and swam in the salt waters of the ocean. They relished the delightful, warm weather and the cool sea breezes. They were well away from the annoyance and health threats of the Virginia swamps. Many reveled in feasting on the abundant sea food like fresh oysters. As Lieutenant Roswell Farnham wrote home: "We are all enjoying ourselves first rate....I think we are as safe as we possibly can be". It was true. Their time in the Peninsula was more like a vacation than a tour of duty in a combat zone. Only two things marred their enjoyment. One was the graves they had to dig for their dead. Even in paradise, death can be a stalker of the living. The greatest cause of death in the Civil War was disease. It dogged the men who bivouacked in the

camps of the war from its beginning to its end. Private Benjamin Underwood of the Bradford Company (D) became the first Vermont casualty of the war. Disease, not lead or iron, took his life.^[25] He was the first of thousands the consummate grim reaper would take in the next four years. The other incident that spoiled the Vermonters' stroll through paradise was called the Battle of Big Bethel.^[26]

To many historians, Big Bethel was not really large enough to be considered a battle. But to those who fought in it, and to the general public at the time, it was a big deal. It was the first action of the war in which one side attacked an entrenched foe. And when it took place June 10, 1861, the winners made a great deal of it and the losers took it hard. The engagement happened because General Benjamin F. Butler, commanding the Union forces in and around Fort Monroe, was informed that the Confederates had thrown up earthworks near a hamlet called Big Bethel just eight miles from the fort on the Yorktown Road. Butler drew up plans to send a force by night to within attacking distance of their position. The entire operation took on an aspect of a comedy of errors practically from the beginning for a lot of reasons.^[27]

First, the officers in charge of the expedition were for the most part completely lacking in any type of military training or previous experience. At the company level, the commanding officers, voted in by the men they were to lead, were frequently found burning the late night oil reading the manual of arms in order to learn the various maneuvers and commands of drill the night before they were to exercise their men in those very same soldierly skills. Second, the initial movements towards the enemy position were to be carried out in the darkness before dawn by totally inexperienced, poorly trained and highly nervous troops. Third, the troops had to traverse unfamiliar ground, in the dark, with no prior reconnaissance and led by local former Negro slaves. Fourth, Butler had split his forces into two groups and had them approach the enemy's position from parallel directions. Fifth, Butler had issued the password "Boston" to be used when troops were approached in the dark by unknown forces. Unfortunately, no one made sure the friendly signal was passed down to all commanding officers leading the Union soldiers in the expedition. The adrenalin level was high in each and every man as they stepped off into the night and stumbled their way towards Big Bethel on June 10. Sweaty palms gripped loaded muskets and itchy fingers lay next to metal trigger guards as the green troops marched towards their first fight.

As dawn broke, the Union forces found themselves well short of their objective. In the dim light, several Union companies collided with one another. Shouts of "Boston" were followed by silence and soon the shouts were replaced with shots. By the time each side realized they were firing at friends not foes, twenty-one men had been wounded, at least two of them mortally. And, whatever advantage of surprise the nighttime skulking through the dark was supposed to offer the Union forces had been destroyed by the sounds of their own gun fire. Lieutenant-Colonel Peter T. Washburn, leading Companies B, D, F, H and K of the First Vermont, responded to the shots by deploying his troops in battle line and advancing cautiously towards the sounds of the gun fire. When Washburn's men hollered "Boston", artillery shells came flying over their heads in response. Again, friendly fire from Union forces that had not been informed about the

significance of the name of the northern city. Once the unfortunate situation was ironed out, some officers thought the whole mission should be scrapped and the everyone should return to base camp. Despite the loss of the element of surprise, higher authorities said “No!”, the probe for the enemy must continue. Eventually, the Union forces approached the Confederate defensive position close enough to see muskets bristling over the mounds of dirt that had been thrown up for protection. After a few half-hearted attempts to breach the earthworks’ center, Colonel Washburn was ordered to take his Vermonters and probe the left flank of the enemy’s works. After marching through woods, a marsh, across a creek and up a ravine, the First came within 100 yards of the Confederates’ defenses. Washburn’s men let go a volley at the Rebel earthworks and the glinting muskets behind them. In a letter Lieutenant Roswell Farnham wrote home after the engagement he said: *“The fire was returned to some extent and several men were killed and wounded at this point, but soon the fire of the rebels nearly ceased, and suggestions were made of an advance, but just then a bugle in the rear, across the creek, sounded retreat and Lieutenant-Colonel Washburn withdrew his men by the same route that they went in.”*^[28]

That was the last order Colonel Washburn would give in the war. As his men retreated as ordered, the Confederates let loose with a barrage of artillery shells. One burst near Colonel Washburn and a fragment of shell removed a large piece of his skull, killing him instantly. The Union forces assembled and returned to their camp. And that was the end of the Battle of Big Bethel.^[29] Throughout the South, the clash was touted as a great victory. In the North, it was viewed as the first of many bitter defeats.

The Vermonters resumed their lives in Camp Phelps, bathing in the sun shine of a Virginia spring. They answered mail call bringing news from home. Occasionally, good-will packages arrived containing treats and necessities of life like clean socks and underwear. But not all the events after the confrontation at Big Bethel were pleasant ones. One day, Private Dana Whitney of Company B strayed too far from camp and was shot dead by lurking Confederates. A few days later, three Vermonters were slightly wounded in an attempt to steal some Rebel cattle. And, of course, there was the constant stalker of every soldier, North and South – disease. There were many maladies that were a perpetual threat to the health and lives of men under arms; even innocuous ones like the measles could become a killer. The three month term of service for the men of the First Vermont expired on August 2, 1861. On the fourth of the month, the Regiment left Fort Monroe and sailed to New Haven, Connecticut. From there, they boarded trains for the ride home.^[30] Henry mustered-out, along with the rest of the First, on August 15, 1861 in Brattleboro, Vermont.^[31] All but five of his comrades returned to their homes in the various towns of Vermont. Seven hundred fifty-three men were mustered-out August 15. Of those, six hundred, including Henry, re-enlisted in different Vermont regiments.^[32]

Henry took two weeks off from the war to relax and rejuvenate before he re-enlisted into the Fifth Vermont Regiment of Volunteers on August 27, 1861 in Middlebury, Vermont. This time, he agreed to be gone from home for three years. Henry was now around thirty-seven years of age. He was an old man according to the average age of a typical Civil War soldier which was twenty-five. He stood five feet ten inches tall, had a dark complexion with dark eyes and black hair. The former farmer was assigned to

Company B of the Fifth Vermont.^[33] Henry was mustered-in on September 7, 1861. He was paid an extra \$2 per month pay for being a veteran who re-enlisted.^[34] On September 16, the Fifth Vermont Volunteers met at St. Albans, Vermont to be formally accepted into the service of the United States Army.^[35] The Fifth Regiment was ready to head south by September 24, 1861. The St. Albans Messenger reported:

"The troops commenced striking their tents at day-break, and from that time until the hour of their departure they were busily engaged in making preparations for their journey. They left their encampment about 8 o'clock, proceeding to the depot in double file. They immediately took the cars which were in readiness for them, and were soon on their way, amid loud and heartfelt cheering...They proceed to Washington by the way of the Vermont Central and Connecticut River Roads to New Haven (Connecticut) where they will take steamers for Jersey City. From Jersey City they will go by rail to Washington, reaching there probably by tomorrow.

The Fifth regiment is well equipped. Their uniforms are made from good cloth and look as if they would prove serviceable. Each man was furnished with a dress and undress coat, a pair of pants, two blankets, one rubber and one flannel, a pair of shoes, two pair of socks, flannel shirts, hat and suspenders. But one thing is lacking to make their outfit complete, and that is overcoats, which will be furnished them on their arrival at Washington."^[36]

The Fifth was organized in St. Albans, Vermont. Its companies were raised in various towns throughout the State. Company B, for example, was comprised of only men from Middlebury; Company E, men from Manchester; Company H, men from Brandon; Company F, men from Cornwall and so on. The Regiment was mustered-in on September 16, 1861 at St. Albans. It was immediately sent to Washington, D.C. and joined the other Vermont troops already at Camp Advance (or Griffin) near the Chain Bridge in Virginia where it was assigned to the Vermont Brigade with which it served during the rest of the war. Throughout the fall of 1861 and the first few months of 1862, it was on duty in the defenses surrounding Washington.

On March 10, 1862, the Fifth moved to Alexandria, Virginia. Two weeks later, the Regiment boarded transport ships for the Virginia Peninsula landing at Fort Monroe. It then marched to Newport News on the 23rd and 24th of March. By April 16, 1862, the Fifth was at Lee's Mills with the Vermont Brigade. On June 29, the Fifth brought four hundred men to the action at Savage's Station. In one half hour of fighting, it lost one hundred eighty-eight of them on the field of battle. Company E of Manchester suffered the heaviest losses of any company from Vermont. Company E went into the engagement with fifty-nine muskets. In that one half hour of battle, it lost forty-four of the fifty-nine; twenty-five were killed and nineteen wounded. Five Cummings brothers and one cousin from that company were among those

casualties. Only one of the six recovered from his wounds. The Regiment as a whole suffered the heaviest loss in killed and wounded in this fray of any Union regiment in a single action of the entire war. In the following few days, the Fifth, along with the rest of the Old Brigade, went on to be involved in more fighting at White Oak Swamp and Malvern Hill as the Federals retreated from General Lee towards Harrison's Landing.^[37] However, Private Brooks was not among them. He had been seriously wounded, left behind and taken prisoner by the Confederates at Savage's Station on June 29. According to a Rutland newspaper article, Henry was hit in the leg and was scooped up along with the sick and the other wounded who had not been carried off the field by friends at Savage's Station.^[38] He was reported by the Confederates as having been included on the list of sick and wounded gathered at Savage's Station and shipped off to confinement in Richmond, Virginia on July 13, 1862. He was placed in a ward on the "3rd floor, Hosp. No. 4, Richmond, Va, 1862" with a gunshot wound to the right thigh. On July 25, 1862, he was paroled at City Point, Virginia.^[39] Henry was then admitted to the U.S.A. General Hospital at Chester, Pennsylvania by August 18 where he spent the next three months attempting to recover from his wound.^[40] He apparently did not heal well for on October 14, 1862, he was issued a disability discharge and sent home.^[41]

For the next twelve months, Henry remained a civilian working on his farm in Bristol supposedly while living with a wife and four children and regaining his vitality and strength. By now, the man should have had enough of playing the soldier to last him a lifetime. He had had a taste of living life under the stars, marching in oppressive heat along dusty roads that choked men with fine particles of dirt or tried to bury them in mud and had even had the glory of being wounded in battle and surviving. That should have satisfied the ordinary man. But not Henry! After spending a total of twenty months in the service of the United States Army in two different wars and being incapacitated from wounds for about a year's time, Henry went in search of an army recruiter in Bristol in order to sign up for a third time. On December 9, 1863, Henry found what he was looking for. At thirty-nine, he was actively seeking another tour of duty during wartime. What would prompt a husband and father of small children to do such a thing? Perhaps a partial answer lay in a personal tragedy that struck the Brooks' family in August of 1863. It was on the 25th of that month that Henry's twins, Herbert and Marcia, became critically ill from an epidemic disease and died two days apart from each other.^[42] How much of a factor in his decision making this calamity accounted for was known only to Henry himself. He was adamant in his declaration to the recruiter that he had no impediment he was aware of that would prevent him from carrying out his duties as a soldier and the examining surgeon seemed to agree. So, Henry was accepted into the military of the U.S. for the fourth time. On December 17, 1863, he was mustered-in the Fifth Vermont again and assigned to Company B. He ended up in Brattleboro, Vermont on the 25th of December where he received \$25 of his \$300 bounty, plus \$35 from the Commutation Fund (for being a substitute for someone else) and a \$2 premium for his recruiter.^[43]

From December, 1863 to April, 1864, Private Henry Brooks performed his duties like any other soldier in the Fifth Vermont. May began a new campaign season and with it, a new commander of the Army of the Potomac. Ulysses S. Grant had been promoted to Brigadier General in April, 1864 and given command of all the Union forces in the

eastern theater. He brought a different attitude concerning how to conduct a war than was held by his more timid predecessors. In a few short months, Grant would earn the nickname “the butcher” by some of his critics. His concept of putting down the Rebellion was to pound the enemy into submission with overwhelming numbers of men and easily replaced quantities of supplies. Surprisingly, the men in the ranks who had to execute Grant’s plans in the field of combat, found this new approach to fighting refreshing. Even though the novel plan meant higher casualty rates, they were relieved to finally serve under a leader willing to fight rather than retreat. The men on the front lines willingly pinned pieces of paper to their blouses with their names on it so that their bodies could be identified before going into battle under Grant because they essentially believed in his vision of how to end the carnage that had been going on for three years. The 1864 campaign season started off with the Army of the Potomac taking to the roads of Virginia that led south towards Richmond. The first clash of the green campaign saw the Fifth Vermont field about 500 men. One month into the campaign, it would lose 349 of those in killed, wounded and missing.^[44]

The route south took Grant’s army right through the middle of a ten square mile second growth wooded area in Virginia locally known as “The Wilderness” because of its densely overgrown thickets of brush, brambles, thorns and saplings. So impenetrable was this tract of woods that it was joked that a man running through it would come out the other side naked. Grant intended to march through this “wilderness” before Lee could bring up his forces to meet him. Then Grant could use the open ground on the Richmond side of the woods to fight the Confederates. But rarely do strategic plans on paper ever execute as neatly in the field as they are drawn up on maps.

Numerous roads ran through this massive tangle of bushes, brush and small trees in all major directions of the compass. The Union forces intended to use the north-south Orange-Plank Road to move towards Richmond. Once beyond the forest, they could easily find ground to their advantage to fight Lee’s forces on. However, the canny Lee saw The Wilderness as the perfect place for an ambush. The dense growth would provide cover and, at the same time, prevent the Yankees from deploying into lines of battle and using their artillery for support. General Lee sprung his trap just as the Union forces arrived in the middle of the Wilderness where the Brock Road running east and west intersected the north-south Orange-Plank Road the blue bellies were on. A major portion of the ensuing Battle Of The Wilderness was fought over control of this vital intersection in the middle of the woods.^[45]

The ball opened about 8 a.m. on the morning of May 5, 1864 when the First Vermont Calvary ran into Rebel calvary just outside the perimeter of the wooded maze of new growth. It was a running battle and the skirmish alerted both sides to each other’s presence. While opposing calvary troopers chased each other around in the open fields adjacent to the woods, Grant attempted to push his infantry columns through the wilderness to the open fields to the south. The speed at which his infantry columns could move forward was hampered by the snail’s pace of his supply train whose precious stores had to be protected from being seized by the Confederates. Only his lead elements managed to get to the crucial intersection first – barely. The lead elements, of course,

consisted of the best marchers in the Army of the Potomac – The Vermont Old Brigade (2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th Vermont Regiments) Knowing the enemy was close, but not knowing just how close, the Vermonters were deployed along the intersection with their backs to the Brock Road. Fighting had been going on all around the patch of scrub oak and brush all morning. It wasn't until about 12:30 p.m. that the Vermonters saw anyone but themselves. Then it was their own calvary hastily riding north on the Orange Plank Road. They knew then that the Confederates were moving closer to the intersection. But all they could see in front of them was a wall of scrub woods and brambles. The two roads and the clearing where they crossed were the only open spaces. Wilbur Fiske of the Second Vermont was at the crossroads and he later wrote: *"Here was a high point of land where the roads cross at right angles, and it is in the midst of an endless wilderness."* Grips tightened around muskets when the men saw more calvary troopers, this time with arms in slings and faces bandaged to cover saber cuts, pass by leading their mounts.

Two companies of the Fifth Vermont, under Captain Charles Ormsbee, were sent forward as skirmishers. In the first line of battle behind them were the Second and Sixth Vermont Regiments. Behind them was the rest of the Fifth with their backs to the Brock Road. Without orders, the men collected logs, fence rails, posts, rotten logs, anything that was lying about that could be used to build a low breastwork for cover. Then the Vermonters leisurely ate hardtack and sipped from canteens as they lulled away the afternoon. About 3:30 p.m., Grant, impatient to know the strength of the enemy forces that had advanced on the crossroads, ordered a reconnaissance forward into the thickets. The men leapt over their crude breastworks and plunged into the dense underbrush and tangled vines. The thickly regrown forest landscape with its ensnaring web of thick vegetation made it impossible to maintain any straight battle line while the men struggled through the impenetrable thicket that reduced visibility to a few yards. Slowly and cautiously the blue line advanced. Seth Eastman of the Sixth described what happened next: *"After taking about ten steps from (our) skirmish line, the battle opened in earnest. Volleys of musketry broke out of the thickets and underbrush in our faces. The rifle balls came in showers."* Lieutenant Colonel John Lewis of the Fifth Vermont said, *"Now came the holocaust."* Lewis Grant said, *"Hundreds of our men fell at the first volley."* According to Eastman, Confederate prisoners taken the next day said they had orders not to fire at the Vermonters until they could see the whites of their eyes. Eastman also reported that two of his comrades were killed instantly at his side. His colonel was wounded and went crazy, riding up and down the line shouting outrageous commands. Henry Houghton of the Third Vermont said the man on his left was shot dead at the first volley and *"a bullet went so near the face of the man in my rear that it took an eye out, two bullets went through my haversack and one through my canteen and another passed so near my neck that it burned the skin."* The Vermonters attempted to advance through the mangle of low brush and dense tree growth only to be met with volleys of flame, smoke and deadly lead projectiles discharged by the Rebels at less than 75 yards. With each raking volley of musketry, the blue lines got thinner and thinner.

Company I of the Fourth Vermont, amounting to fifty-three men when it stepped off into the woods, soon found itself with no officers standing. A sergeant commanded the twenty-one men left uninjured. Luther Harris from the Fourth said two pieces of artillery had been brought up to the crossroads and had fired several shots in the direction of the

unseen enemy. The first shot killed eight men on the left of his company. Some soldiers raced back to the intersection to inform the gunners they were hitting their own men. Early in the fighting, the second line of Vermonters, the Second and the Sixth Regiments, were ordered forward. According to Wilbur Fiske, *"They (the Confederates) poured their bullets into us so fast that we had to lie down to load and fire. I had a bullet pass through my clothes on each side, one of them giving me a pretty sharp rap, and one ball split the crown of my cap in two, knocking it off my head."* Corporal Eric Ditty of the Sixth Vermont also had a close call in the wilderness. A comrade on his right carrying the U.S. flag was wounded, as was the corporal on his left and another corporal standing just behind him who was killed. In another case, a corporal and sixteen men were ordered to secure a small road that ran through the woods. None of them made it. across the road; all were either killed or wounded before they even got to it. On went the death struggle amid the trees, saplings, brush, brambles, vines and thorns. Sheets of flame burst from the thickets only rods away. Sudden appearances and disappearances of shadows in the smoke and jungle of vegetation was all anyone could see. Men hugged the ground on both sides, not daring to rise to either advance or retreat. Too often the dull thud of a bullet finding its mark was heard. Bullets whined and whistled everywhere, mowing down trees, brush and bodies. The lead missiles struck everything, smashing faces, disemboweling abdomens, blowing away brains, rupturing hearts, bursting through lungs, destroying heads, feet, private parts. Curses mixed with prayers amid the endless racket. In the din, attempts to speak with one's nearest comrade proved futile. Death came unseen, sometimes from impossible directions. And so, the battle persisted.

Despite all of the casualties the Vermonters were inflicting on the enemy in this heavy weight toe-to-toe slug fest, the Confederates' fire seemed to intensify. The Vermonters had been engaged unsupported for a long time. It was feared that a Rebel attack was imminent. Union General Hancock pushed reinforcements up the Brock Road. Two hours passed before they were anywhere near ready to pitch in. Well into the fight, the nearly unscathed Fifth Vermont was ordered forward and placed on their comrades' left where the greatest threat of a Rebel attack was expected. As the Fifth moved into the dim, smoldering woods, they immediately came under heavy fire. The Regiment staggered then stopped. The Union high command wanted to extract the battered Vermonters from their advanced position. But anything that moved in the woods was soon the target of a ferocious volley of lead. A plan was finally developed which required using the Fifth Vermont, the freshest and most intact regiment readily available, as a decoy so that the other devastated units could withdraw to the rear. The Fifth was to make a charge at the enemy thus diverting the Rebels' attention from anything else other than the blue line advancing on their position. Major Dudley of the Fifth was asked by his superiors if he thought his regiment was up to the challenge. His reply was "Yes!" When the Fifth made its charge, they found themselves fifty yards in advance of their own lines, fully exposed to fire not only from their front, but also from both flanks. Their bold thrust forward achieved its purpose. While the Confederates dealt with the Fifth, the other regiments were able to retreat to the crossroads and relative safety of their puny breastworks they had constructed earlier. The Fifth then disengaged with the enemy and they, too, retreated back to the intersection. The Confederates continued to pressure the Yankee lines, but after being reinforced with fresh troops, they were able to hold their ground as night fell

on the battle field. Out in front of them lay hundreds of their dead and wounded comrades. Some men tried to grab some rest while listening to the moans and cries for help of the wounded. Litter bearers attempted to retrieve the living in the dark. They could not use any form of light as it would immediately draw enemy fire. They risked life and limb to do what they could for the suffering, but many Green Mountain Boys died on that field who could have been saved if they had been able to receive medical attention right away.

The end of May 5, 1864 was a sad one for the Old Vermont Brigade. As one of its survivors said in a letter home after the battle: *"The Old Brigade was shot to pieces."* Of five colonels, one was unhurt. Fifty of its best line officers had been killed or wounded. A thousand Vermont soldiers had fallen that afternoon. Seth Eastman of the Third Vermont said: *"Most of my friends lay dead or wounded, scattered in the field somewhere. We looked through the regiment to see who was left, and we found thirteen of my company still unhurt. Co. F of our regiment had only four men left. The regiment had 94 muskets that night."* If you looked at the total casualties of the Old Brigade which consisted of five regiments or about three thousand muskets, you would find that the Vermonters accounted for about one-tenth of all of Grant's losses that day; 1,232 killed, wounded and missing Vermonters against 12,485 in the Army of the Potomac as a whole. If you added to that number of casualties from Vermont from the Old Brigade, the losses of other units (First Vermont Cavalry and three companies of Sharpshooters), the total of killed, wounded and missing Vermonters from the Battle of The Wilderness amounted to 1,420.

Counted among those numbers was Private Henry Brooks. He was wounded on May 5, most likely in that charge upon the enemy's works that allowed his fellow comrades the opportunity to return to the safety of their makeshift breastworks at the intersection of the Brock and Orange-Plank Roads. The nature and severity of his wounds were not revealed in his official military records. However, three weeks after the battle, in the Rutland Weekly Herald which published a list of all the casualties of the fight, a hint appeared. The Herald said: "Henry Brooks, enlisted from Bristol, shoulder, slightly."^[46] From May until mid-November, 1864, Henry remained in the Columbian General Hospital at Washington, D.C. being treated for his wound and recovering from his ordeal in the woods of Virginia.^[47] On November 22, Henry was admitted to Emory General Hospital also in Washington, D.C. He apparently was having serious problems healing from his shoulder wound. On December 31, 1864, he was declared "unfit for active field service, on account of wounds or disease contracted in line of duty, but fit for duty in the Invalid Corps (later called the Veteran Reserve Corps)". The seriousness of his shoulder wound was described as something a bit more than "slight. The nature of his disability was explained as "a partial paralysis of left arm & defective vision."^[48] Private Brooks, however, remained a patient at Emory from November 22, 1864 through mid-June, 1865. He was then transferred to yet another military hospital, Lincoln General again located in D.C. on June 24, 1865.^[49] From Lincoln, Henry was issued a pass on July 17 to go home from D.C. to Burlington, Vermont for the apparent purpose of rejoining his regiment.^[50] Instead, the trip ended with his being mustered-out of the service. It wasn't clear in his compiled service records whether the discharge was Henry's idea or the War Department's. On July 20, 1865, the officer in charge of the Mustering Office in

Burlington sent a letter to Captain E.M. Camp, ADG (of the Fifth?) saying: "Private H. Brooks 5th VT Vols was sent here by you to be mustered-out. The man reported without descriptive list. Please forward it to this office at once." The lieutenant in charge of the Burlington office got his response to the request July 26, 1865.^[51] Henry received his discharge as an individual on August 1, a month after the other members of the Fifth had been disbanded. His final accounting indicated he had drawn \$59.72 worth of clothing and had been paid \$160 of his \$400 bounty.^[52] Finally, Henry was clear to return home to his hearth, wife and children in Bristol where he could exchange his woolen blue uniform for a work shirt and pair of farmer's overalls.

The 1870 Federal Census reported Henry as being a forty-six year old Bristol farmer with a wife, four children, a father-in-law and a boarder living in his household. Harriet was his forty-two year old wife. Henry's surviving children were George H, twenty-three; "Iola" (Julia?), twenty; Willie, seventeen; and Judson, fourteen. The father-in-law was Nathan Cunningham, Harriet's father, a retired seventy-seven year old farmer. The boarder was Marcellus Bowers, the twenty-four year old son of Charles Bowers who had served with Henry in Company B of the Fifth Vermont and whose biographical sketch appeared earlier in this volume. Henry was farming a small operation worth only \$500. He had personal property valued at a measly \$150 more. George H. was a house painter as was his friend, Marcellus. The other children had no specific occupations of any kind; they were just "at home".^[53]

Sometime prior to February 28, 1877, Henry Brooks "disappeared" from the village of Bristol. No one seemed to have any idea where he went off to. His wife may have known his whereabouts, but she was not sharing that information with anyone in town apparently. On February 28, the Rutland Daily Herald made a surprise announcement in their paper solving the mysterious disappearance of Henry. They published that he "was seen a short time ago in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin."^[54] Henry's brother, Cephas Junior, had been a farmer in Sun Prairie for nearly twenty years. When Cephas Senior left Vermont before 1870, the seventy year old landed on his son's farm in Wisconsin.^[55] For some reason, it now appeared that Henry joined his brother and father on the farm just west of Sun Prairie. His farm, wife and family remained in Bristol, Vermont. Three years later, when the 1880 Federal Census was taken in June, Henry was still living in Sun Prairie.^[56] However, his father had died in November, 1871.^[57] Henry's brother, Cephas Junior, lived until December 22, 1884.^[58]

It must have been after his brother passed that Henry returned to Vermont. He was listed on the Special Schedule for 1890 as a resident of Bristol. Included on the form was some interesting remarks about Henry's war wounds. It said "gunshot wound, left leg, right shoulder".^[59] At the time the Federal Census was taken in early 1890, it appeared that Henry was living at the Commercial House located on East Street in Bristol, not on his farm in town. Whether he was estranged from his wife, Harriet, or not was uncertain. However, it was clear that he was not living with her in 1890. The Middlebury Register reported on April 4, that Henry Brooks was "quite sick" at his residence at the Commercial House.^[60] Then on April 9, the Rutland Daily Herald printed a notice that read: "Henry Brooks, who has been sick at the Commercial House, died Friday evening."

[61] The Middlebury Register the next day gave just a two sentence obituary for the veteran of two of America's wars who had been wounded twice in the line of duty: "Henry Brooks was buried from the Commercial House last Sunday. He was a veteran of two wars, the Mexican and the Rebellion." [62] Not much of a recognition for a man who enlisted in his nation's army three times and was disabled for the rest of his life by two different gunshot wounds received in two different battles.

November of 1890, Harriet, officially Henry's widow, was granted a pension from the Government.[63] She continued living in Bristol with her invalid son, William (Willie) S. Brooks until her death at seventy-eight on December 4, 1907.[64]

NOTES

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