

A Short History of the 79th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment

The 79th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment, The Cameron Rifle Highlanders (also known as the Cameron Highlanders, Highlanders, and The Highlander Guards) was formed as the 79th Regiment of the New York State Militia and was comprised primarily of emigrant Scots and Scottish-Americans. The militia was modeled after the famous Scottish regiment of the British Army, the famed 79th Regt. of Foot, aka "The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders".

The 79th New York received permission from the New York State government to wear a traditional Scottish style uniform that included kilts in the "Cameron of Erracht" tartan, black Glengarries with red-white-and blue dicing around the headband, and red-trimmed navy-blue dress jackets were worn setting them apart from all other regiments. A sporran, or "hairy purse" was worn around the waist and high socks with red and white dicing rounded out this flashy uniform. As not enough material could be obtained to make kilts for each member, a change to "Cameron of Erracht" tartan trousers, or "trews" in place of kilts and blue Kepis in place of the Glengarries. Later after the first battle of Bull Run the standard uniform of the Federal Army were worn.

As most militia units of the time there was a military and social function associated with its members. As militia for New York State, their original duty was to train as heavy artillery to man the forts around New York City. As a prestigious unit they were called upon to provide an honor guard for the Prince of Wales and the Japanese Ambassador when they visited the United States. The regiment was also a social club for its members and received backing from the St. Andrews and Caledonian Societies of New York.

At the start of the American Civil War the regiment only numbered some 400 men and was not able to answer President Lincoln's first call for 90-day volunteers. In order to meet the required 1,000-man number, the regiment then aggressively recruited men around the city and by the time of President Lincoln's second call for volunteers the unit was ready and was accepted for service for a three-year term of enlistment and was mustered into the Union Army on May 29th, 1861.

On June 2nd, 1861, the men of the 79th New York Cameron Highlanders marched down Broadway in New York City, many of the men in their kilts. One newspaper reporter was quoted as saying it was "the most hideous thing he ever saw with all those naked knees". Little did the men know that they were on the adventure of a lifetime, "Off to see the Elephant" as the phrase was used to those going off to battle. Little did these men know that they were about to take part in nearly every major engagement of the Civil War and become one of the most famous and well-traveled regiments in the Union army.

By middle of June the 79th was assigned to the defense of Washington and was busy with training and helping to build the various forts around the city. As pressure built for a Union advance on Confederate positions the 79th was assigned to the Third Brigade of Tyler's Division, under Colonel William Tecumseh Sherman and towards the end of July the Union Army was advancing on the Confederate positions near Manassas.

On July 21st, 1861 the 79th New York Infantry experienced some of the fiercest fighting and suffered some of the highest Union casualties at First Bull Run (referred to by the Confederates as First Manassas). Assigned to capture Rebel positions around Henry House

A Short History of the 79th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment

Hill, the men of the 79th gallantly charged the hill three times, with their commander, Col. James Cameron (brother of Secretary of War Simon Cameron) killed during one of the assaults. The Union army suffered its first major defeat at Bull Run and the Highlanders then acted as a rear guard during the retreat to Washington. The regiment sustained one of the heaviest losses of the battle, losing 32 killed, including their commanding officer, 51 wounded (eight mortally) and 115 captured or missing—a total of 198 - 22 percent of its strength.

The month of August was a difficult one for the regiment, it was still suffering very low morale with the loss of their commander and so many men at Bull Run. To make matters worse the army was slow to replace much of their lost equipment and the men were moved from camp to camp. Assigned the back-breaking task of strengthening the fortifications around Washington the men grew resentful as rumors of a return home to recruit proved untrue. Worse, to the men, was instead of being allowed to vote on replacement officers a new commander Col Isaac Stevens was placed in charge the regiment. With the lack of officers to control the men, and a “little bit of drink” the 79th mutinied.

When General McClellan got wind of the mutiny, he dispatched Regular Army troops to Washington to surround the rebellious 79th with artillery. Col. Stevens called upon the 79th. "You are soldiers, and it is duty to obey. I am your colonel, and your obedience is due to me." As the Regulars filed around the 79th preparing to fire into the ranks of the 79th, the mutiny came to an end. An order from Gen. McClellan deprived the 79th of their colors. The flag was not to be returned to the 79th until they learned the first duty of a soldier is to obey and that they prove on the field of battle that they are not wanting in courage.

Col. Stevens drilled the 79th in all aspects of a soldier's life with an unrelenting insistence on Regular Army dress and deportment. After an impressive skirmish with the Confederates at Lewinville, Virginia, Stevens arranged for the return of the 79th's colors. General McClellan made the presentation in person telling the men that they had acquitted themselves as true soldiers. Stevens had won the 79th's hearts and minds to the extent that when he was promoted to Brigadier General, the 79th requested to be transferred with him to his new command. They presented him with an ornate sword, sash and spurs.

Stevens requested the Highlanders to accompany him on an expedition aboard Du Pont's ships. McClellan protested but the 79th set sail with 12,000 other infantry units to Port Royal, South Carolina. By Nov 7th the fleet was shelling the Confederate forts guarding Port Royal, and on Nov 8th the 79th landed by small boats to occupy the former Fort Beauregard at Bay Point, which was promptly renamed Fort Seward. The fort had been hastily abandoned by members of the Beaufort Volunteer Artillery and the Highlanders found vast stores of food, clothing, bowie knives and two barrels of whiskey.

For the remainder of November and the early part of December, the Highlanders spent their time occupying St. Helena Island. The men befriended the many former slaves and obtained much fresh food and paid the former slaves to bring them oysters and fresh seafood which they enjoyed very much. The Highlanders set up camp at the plantation owned by Dr. Jenkins, while there former slaves told them of a group of rebels who hid in the woods

A Short History of the 79th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment

on the other end of the island by day and at night would rob and terrorize the negroes left on the plantations. Captain John A. Falconer's company was sent to investigate and after arriving at the area indicated by the former slaves, they found a group of men trying to leave by boat. The men immediately levelled their muskets and ordered them to land, which they did. One man proved to be Benjamin Chaplain, a resident of St. Helena Island. He is a captain of a mounted rifle company, and a terror to all the former slaves on the island.

On December 11th, 1861, the Highlanders and the rest of Stevens Brigade was sent to the city of Beaufort to help occupy the town. Arriving late that evening the regiment made camp and started to settle in, but their sleep was cut short as they were ordered to fall in at 2300 that evening in light marching order. They started out and it was so dark that the men could not see where they were going. By morning they had marched over 10 miles and were at the Port Royal Ferry. After a few hours rest, the regiment was put ordered into picket duty stretching about five miles from the Seabrook Plantation to the Brickyard Point with the ferry located about the center of their picket line. The Highlanders could see the Confederate troops digging entrenchments and mounting cannons to their front. The picket duty was fairly light and went without any significant action. On the 25th, the Highlanders got into a very minor skirmish with some Rebels across the Coosaw River, with some of the regiment getting lost in the thick woods and not returning to camp until the next day.

The Highlanders learned of a Scottish connection with their Rebel counterparts, as it was reported that there was a regiment of Charleston Highlanders on the mainland opposite them. When it was known that they were opposite their "cousins" a truce of sorts was maintained and no firing was done while on outpost duty. The men became bored with picket duty and wished they were back at St. Helena Island, so when word began to circulate that a movement was imminent the regiment became very excited.

General Stevens was planning a crossing of the Port Royal Ferry to advance on the enemy works and destroy the batteries that the rebels had established there. General Stevens planned to land his forces at three locations, covered by navy gunboats. With the attack scheduled for New Year's Day the Union forces started to move out on the afternoon of the 31st.

With the attack starting on the morning of the January 1st, 1862, the Highlanders landed across the Coosaw from Brickyard Point and deployed as skirmishers and proceeded to drive rebel soldiers from their positions on the mainland. Driving through some woods the Highlanders came upon a rebel fort, being outnumbered the Confederates retreated, spiking the one gun that was in the fort. The Highlanders continued their advance, suffering one man wounded in this action. Upon halting their advance, the men returned the fort, destroying the earthworks and resolved to bring the cannon as a prize with them when they returned across the river to their camp.

That night the men wished they had some whiskey to celebrate the New Year and went to bed without some. They were awakened around midnight with the cry of "Fa in for whuskey", as General Stevens with his compliments sent the men a "wee drop" for New Years in return for the fine performance of the men during the attack that day.

A Short History of the 79th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment

The next day before returning to their camp the regiment was ordered to continue destroying Confederate defensive positions and they put several cabins and two “fine mansions” to the torch as they had been used by Confederate forces as headquarters and storage buildings. After completing their tasks, the Highlanders returned to their camp located near the Port Royal ferry. The men decided to name their camp after their former commander and called it Camp Stevens.

A few days later the men returned to Beaufort and established a camp near where the National Cemetery is currently located. By General Stevens orders the men would conduct drill and formal parades several times a week. The regiment was also assigned guard duty for facilities in town (General Stevens headquarters was the Tabby House). As the weather started to turn colder the men would scrounge for items to burn in the many abandoned homes in Beaufort. In one of the homes the men found a piano that they soon “appropriated for their use.

During their stay in Beaufort the men employed many former slaves to perform camp duties such as cleaning and cooking. The men also continued to have the former slaves get them fresh fruits and vegetables and seafood that they had grown fond of, especially oysters.

The men tried to make their camp as homely as possible with confiscated furniture and adapted abandoned pets from the town. One in particular was a dog named Tip, so called for a short part of his anatomy, and another dog named Major. Both dogs were very popular with the men and Tip stayed with the regiment for the remainder of war and returned with them to New York city when they were discharged. The men also adapted a pet alligator (the alligator stayed in Beaufort when they left). When the men had some free time, the Highlanders liked the normal games of chance all soldiers played, but they also enjoyed playing games of baseball and cricket.

During their stay in Beaufort several sutlers were allowed to set up store there and the men availed themselves to items that they could not get from the army. Also, some photographers set up shop and took pictures of the men for fifty cents. Even at that price the men would enjoy getting their picture taken. Towards the end of the month of March several missionary ladies from up north arrived in Beaufort and the men of the Seventy Ninth were very pleased to find a number of them from New York City and several of the men were acquainted with them and they escorted the ladies through the camp to the delight of the regiment.

On the 15th of March there was considerable excitement in town as an unknown steamer came into view and the guards fired their muskets in alarm. When the steamer reached the wharf, it became known it was the ship *Planter* which was involved in one of the greatest episodes of the Civil War.

Planter was piloted by Robert Smalls, a Negro slave from Beaufort who had become a pilot, navigating the water ways around Beaufort and Charleston. Smalls devised a plot with his fellow slaves aboard that they would steal the ship while the white officers were ashore one evening. Wearing the coat and hat of the ship's captain and knowing all the proper signals to make as they passed the Confederate forts of Charleston harbor, they made their way to the Union blockading fleet and eventually to Union forces in Beaufort.

A Short History of the 79th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment

Sgt William Todd (the diarist from Company B, we get a great deal of our information about the unit) writes that at daylight several members of the regiment went on board to talk to Robert Smalls and the found him to be “a bright intelligent man of about thirty years of age”. He discussed how he came up with the idea once they knew of the Union occupation of Port Royal. Sgt. Todd became friends with Mr. Smalls and continued to correspond with him after the war.

In April, the men returned to Port Royal Ferry in response to renewed Confederate activity in the area. While on picket duty the Highlanders noticed a number of slaves who gathered there having escaped from nearby plantations. The men determined to help them and having found a small boat rowed across while others remained alert in case of a rebel attack. Some thirteen men, women and children were found and during the rescue some Confederate troops arrived and were only turned back by the Highlanders on guard. Eventually all the refugees were brought across.

On May 28th, the Highlanders were assigned to be part of a Union army expedition to destroy the railroad bridge over the Pocotaligo River. The men were moved into position around Port Royal Ferry, initially to be held in reserve. As the Union forces crossed over the Coosaw on May 29th, they began to run to heavier than expected Confederate forces near Garden Corners, and the 79th was called into action to help drive them from the small town. The Highlanders continued to advance towards the bridge and drive the Confederate forces defending the bridge away. Company E of the Highlanders was detailed to assist in its destruction. The bridge being severally damaged and with more Confederate forces beginning to arrive, the Union commander felt outnumbered and ordered the raiding party to return to Port Royal Ferry.

The Highlanders then returned to their camp on May 31st, satisfied with their successful mission, when they learned they were to prepare three days rations, this being done in preparation for a move from camp and operations in a different location. After supper that night the men began the task of packing and preparing for the movement. They found that during their stay they had accumulated much more than they could take and the called on the former slaves that they had befriended to take whatever they could, Sgt. Todd writes that they were last seen “staggering” under the loads of the abundance of articles the Highlanders gave them.

On June 1, 1862, the men began to board steamers for the short trip to Hilton Head, where they would board ships to take them to their next assignment. While they were boarding the steamers, General Stevens arrived to give the men a “blessing” before their departure. As the steamers set sail the men looked fondly on the town of Beaufort where they had spent a many enjoyable months. Meanwhile the men of the Highlander regiment looked forward to their next adventure in the war.

June of 1862 found the 79th part of a bungled Battle of Sessionville, South Carolina on James Island. Brigadier Gen. Henry W. Benham was in temporary charge of the 79th's brigade and one other. He ordered the 79th on a devastating and hopeless attack on the fort (also known as the Tower Battery). The approach to the fort was surrounded by swamp and defended by rifle pits, trenches, and obstacles. The 79th approached the fort behind the 8th Michigan Infantry, who had been cut down by devastating fire. The Highlanders reached

A Short History of the 79th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment

the fort and was the only unit to actually enter the fort, but without support the Highlanders were trapped. Promised reinforcements never arrived and the 79th was forced to retreat back across the treacherous grounds they had so bravely fought through to reach the fort. The Union attack failed but the 79th was praised by the Confederate newspapers the *Charleston Mercury* stating, "Thank God Lincoln had only one 79th regiment."

On July 8th, the 79th's brigade was transferred back to Virginia. Sherman stated that he had never seen regular troops that equaled the Highlanders in soldierly bearing and appearance. The 79th participated in Second Bull Run in late August of 1862.

At the Battle of Chantilly, Virginia, on 1 September 1862, General Stevens took the flag of the 79th from the fifth flag bearer to fall, but this time it was to lead them in a charge against Stonewall Jackson's troops. He shouted, "Highlander's, my Highlander's, follow your general!" when he was struck by a bullet to the head and killed instantly. After the war, the surviving 79th members sent the ripped and bloodstained banner to Steven's widow with a note that read, "His memory is engraved on the hearts of every one of his Highlanders."

On September 17th, the 79th was to fight in the bloodiest day in American history, Antietam, near Sharpsburg, Md. They fought the Confederates at Burnside's Bridge and at Sherrick's farm. Amazing as it might seem, the 79th's total losses were only 40 casualties. After Antietam, the Highlanders were at Fredericksburg, VA but not engaged in the battle. After the infamous mud march in January, the Highlanders were sent to Kentucky to participate in the defense of the state against Confederate cavalry raids, and towards the end of June the majority of the Highlanders were sent west to reinforce Grant's army at Vicksburg. The remainder of the Highlanders were sent to assist in the defense of the Green River Bridge which was attacked by General John Hunt Morgan's cavalry in July.

The 79th's next major engagement wasn't until July, 1863 when they arrived shortly after Vicksburg had fallen. They were too late to fight and sent off to tear up railroad tracks near Jackson, Mississippi. The Highlanders arrived in Jackson only to find 150 sleeping Rebels. Gen. Joe E. Johnston had left behind after he abandoned the city. The 79th promptly captured the sleeping Rebels.

The 79th marched to join Major General Ambrose E. Burnside's campaign in eastern Tennessee. On 2 September 1863, they took the key rail city of Knoxville. To defend the city from Rebel assault, the Union troops built several forts and the 79th and others occupied an existing fort, Fort Loudon, which had been renamed Fort Sanders. Learning of the attack early enough, preparations were made in defense of the fort. General Longstreet had spied a Highlander walking a dog (probably Tip and William Sam of Company B) directly into the fort. Not knowing that Tip and Private Sam had walked on a plank, Longstreet assumed the fort was not guarded by a ditch.

This mistake may have cost the Confederates the battle. Longstreet attacked at dawn on the 29th of November with three brigades. The 79th quickly poured water into the ditch, and while the attack was still forming, the water froze. The Confederates charged the fort and

A Short History of the 79th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment

the 79th opened fire. Reaching the ditch, the Confederates began to slip and slide. The Highlanders threw artillery shells with lit fuses into the ditch. The explosions ripped apart the attackers. First Sergeant Francis Judge leaped into the ditch yanked the 51st Georgia Infantry colors from the flag-bearer and retreated back to the fort. He won the Medal of Honor for this. The Confederates scrambled out of the ditch in retreat. The 79th shouted, "Remember James Island", referring to their own failed attack at Seccessionville. 813 Rebels were killed while only 9 casualties were suffered by the 79th. Longstreet gave up on Tennessee and joined Gen. Lee's forces in Virginia. The 79th wintered in Tennessee and continued operations against Longstreet's forces during the winter and early spring.

The Highlanders last year of the war saw them move east again with General Burnside's IX Corps when it was made part of the Army of the Potomac. In the spring of 1864 General Grant was moving against General Lee in what became known as the Overland Campaign. The two armies engaged in some of the fiercest fighting then known.

The 79th's last engagement was near Spotsylvania Court House on May 8, 1864. They were to meet Longstreet one final time. The Highlanders moved forward against veteran troops of Longstreet. They smashed fences and drove the enemy from the field. Commander of the 79th Col. Morrison was wounded and command of the 79th was passed to Col. Laing. Eight days later, their three-year enlistment up, the Highlanders began the long march back to New York City, with only 120-130 of the original members left. They received a hero's welcome at Mercer House and were mustered out of service. A few reenlisted, but the original Highlanders had seen their last battle at Spotsylvania.

Sources:

The Complete Civil War: The definitive fact file on the campaigns, weapons, tactics, armies and key figures. By Philip Katcher

Blue Bonnets O'er the Border, by William Mark McKnight

New York in the War of the Rebellion, by Frederick Phisterer

The Seventy-Ninth Highlanders, New York Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865, by William Todd

The Union army: a history of military affairs in the loyal states, 1861-65 -- records of the regiments in the Union army -- cyclopedia of battles -- memoirs of commanders and soldiers. Madison, WI: Federal Pub. Co., 1908. Volume II.

The Sword of Lincoln: The Army of the Potomac, by Jeffry D. Wert