

The Eighth Connecticut Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War



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Foreword by Matthew Warshauer

The following excerpt pages describing Hill's Point Battery aka Fort Huger are taken from *The Eighth Connecticut Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War*, a modern regimental history of the Eighth Connecticut (© 2023) written by William A. Liska and Kim L. Perlotto, long time members of The Eighth Connecticut Volunteer Infantry, Company A, Incorporated, a Civil War living history organization. Go to this website (www.8cv.org) for information on how to order this book.

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Democratic district, I was greatly pleased at the result + I really believe every man voted independently. Two or three Co's were unanimous for Buckingham + one had a majority for Seymour but 'twas not a fair vote. More votes were polled than there were voters.¹⁴

That same day, Sergeant Jay Nettleton also wrote home about the political opinions he heard in the regiment. "There has been considerable interest manifest in the Election through all of our Regt. The unanimous voice is 'glad that Seymour is defeated.' Our Co. did not vote, but there would not have been more than two or three votes for Seymour if every man had voted.... In some Cos. there was 1 in 30 or 36. Co. E was unanimous for Buckingham. Co. H is probably a good share Seymour men. They voted for Seymour mostly out of spite to their Capt. [Elam Goodrich]."¹⁵

The Siege of Suffolk Begins

The 8th Connecticut now served in the defensive fortifications around Suffolk. The enemy was not far off, so every unit practiced greater vigilance. Picket duty and long roll alarms (drum call to battle) were common, and the men often slept on their weapons. General Longstreet and the Confederates were closing in from the west.

On Saturday, April 11, General Peck rode through the town and the camp, sounding the alarm. The Eighth was called out by the long roll to defend the works around Fort McClellan against a Confederate attack from the west. About 4 p.m., the cavalry videttes came running in. (A vidette was a mounted sentinel whose duty was to watch the enemy and report any danger.) One of the officers told Captain Martin B. Smith that he had better fall back quickly. Captain Smith told him that he would do that when he received orders.¹⁶

When the Confederates attacked, the Eighth held their ground and repelled the attack. Only one man in the Eighth was wounded. Private George H. Tucker, Company H, was badly wounded in the neck, but survived.¹⁷ The Confederates continued pressure on Sunday when they showed attacked again with battery and infantry. By Monday morning, April 13, the enemy had retired from the front. They were still present in force, however, holding a line along the Blackwater River road.

Thus began the Confederate siege operations on the Union garrison and their Suffolk defenses. The Union forces were not truly surrounded, however, since they could be supplied by the Navy along the shores and rivers. Suffolk itself was, at that time, accessible by boat via Hampton Roads and the Nansemond River.

On Tuesday, April 14, the Eighth was ordered to move from their post south of the city to a post north of the city to support operations along the Nansemond River. That night an artillery engagement began between the Union and Confederate batteries on opposite sides of the river. On Wednesday night, April 15, the Eighth was sent out on picket along the river to relieve the 10th New Hampshire. They settled deeper into the routine of fatigue work and picket duty.

About this time, Captain Charles M. Coit recounted a story demonstrating the mindlessness of army bureaucracy. Lieutenant Samuel S. Foss was discharged from the service, apparently because he returned to duty in Virginia. It seems that Colonel Ward was away from the regiment when the unit moved to Newport News. At

the same time, Lieutenant Foss, who had recently been promoted, was also away on detached duty in North Carolina. In returning to the Eighth, both men travelled through Washington, D.C., to find out where their regiment was located.

Colonel Ward and Lieutenant Foss were both named on a single pass that the colonel held. So, when the Provost Guard picked up Lieutenant Foss in Washington, he told them that Colonel Ward was holding his pass. The Provost Guard ordered Foss to report to the Provost Marshall with the pass at 10 a.m. the next morning. But since the colonel and the lieutenant were supposed to leave Washington at 8 a.m., Colonel Ward advised Foss to ignore the order and proceed with him to join their regiment at Newport News.

That's where bureaucracy prevailed. The officers at Suffolk received orders to summarily discharge Lieutenant Foss for not appearing for the Provost Marshall as ordered. It may have been wrong, but it was understandable that Foss disobeyed the order. As Captain Charles Coit later wrote to his family at home, "Foss was certainly entirely in the wrong in not reporting as ordered + cannot complain that he is discharged but under like circumstances I think nine out of ten officers in the service would have disobeyed in like manner + I cannot blame Col. Ward more than I do Sam."¹⁸

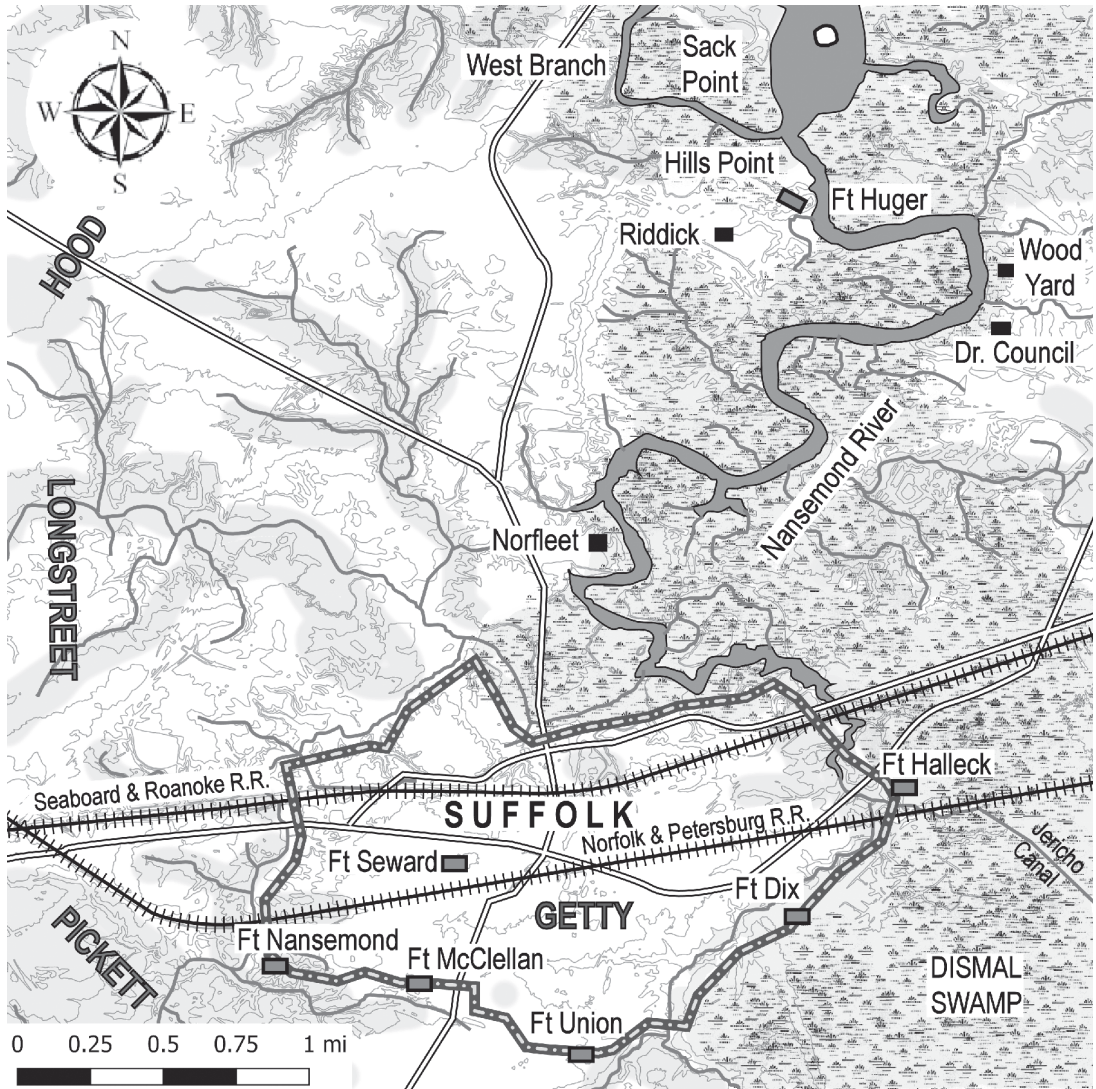
Samuel Foss returned home to Norwich, a civilian once more. But with the help of Governor Buckingham and others, he was able to get his case reviewed, and he was reinstated. He returned to the regiment once more around the middle of May. He was later wounded at Ft. Harrison, Virginia, then discharged, but survived the war.¹⁹

One other change in the Eighth's leadership happened that spring. Captain Charles L. Upham of Company K was promoted to lieutenant colonel of the Eighth on March 9, 1863. On April 18, 1863, he was transferred and promoted to colonel of the 15th Connecticut.²⁰

Hill's Point Battery or Fort Huger

At the fork in the Nansemond River, guarding the river from ascension to Suffolk, sat a Confederate fort. A branch flows in from the west, where the main channel continues north, broadens out, and empties into the James River near Hampton Roads. The fort was known by many names. Some called it the "West Branch Battery," and others called it the "Old Fort." When the 8th Connecticut painted the battle honor on their flag, they called it "Hill's Point Battery."

The old fort was originally constructed during the War of 1812 to block vessels from reaching Suffolk by the Nansemond.²¹ It was an earthen fort with a 400-foot front and a 225-foot width. During the fighting around Suffolk, the old fort was seized by the Confederates, and prepared for garrison and guns. They reinforced the fort quickly, and placed guns there on the night of April 13. It was now named "Fort Huger" by the Confederates to honor the man responsible for its rehabilitation during the siege. "Captain Robert M. Stribling's Fauquier (Virginia) Battery, with its two 24-pounder howitzers and three 12-pounder Napoleons would occupy the old fort



Map 12. Vicinity of Fort Huger and Suffolk, Virginia, April 1863.

after it was modified for field guns.”²² Stribling’s battery consisted of 59 men. Infantry support was provided by about 150 men from Companies A and B of the 44th Alabama. They were commanded by Captain David L. Bozeman of Company A.²³

The Union gunboats thus were now blocked from sailing up the Nansemond to Suffolk. There were, however, Union gunboats already above the fort and at Suffolk. On the night of Saturday, April 18, the 8th Connecticut and the 89th New York regiments received orders to fall in at midnight. At midnight the two units were told they would cross the river to storm the lower fort in the dark. They marched, boarded a gunboat, shoved off, but then were recalled. Lieutenant Roswell Lamson, the Navy creator of the plan, with Getty’s support, determined the troops were too tardy to mount the attack before broad daylight.²⁴

On Sunday morning, April 19, things were quiet. The four right wing companies of the Eighth (Companies G, B, H, and C) were ordered out on picket. About 4 o'clock, the six remaining companies of the Eighth, about 140 men under Colonel John E. Ward, and five companies of the 89th New York, about 150 men under Lieutenant Colonel Theophilus L. England, were ordered under arms.²⁵ They immediately marched to the gunboat *Stepping Stones*, where they were screened by a large pile of wood on shore while boarding. General Getty went aboard with them. The boat was curtained in canvas stretched around the deck. The men were ordered to keep still and quiet, as the boat started down the river. Sergeant Seth Plumb wrote that Colonel Ward gave the orders as follows. Company K with their Sharps rifles were to go first, and take a stand on the bank to cover any retreat. Company E was then to charge the rear of the fort, followed by Companies F, D, I, and A in that order. Then the 89th New York was to follow, with three companies to help get the marine howitzers into place.²⁶

The gunboat *Stepping Stones* descended the stream silently, and approached the landing behind the fort, which was obscured by a small bluff there. The boat headed in, but it stopped in deep water. When the planks were thrown out, they floated away. Lieutenant Lamson maneuvered the stern back towards the banks. Colonel Ward ordered, "Every man for himself!" and they all jumped in, some up to their necks. They rushed the fort, "yelling like daemons."²⁷

Sergeant Seth Plumb described the furious attack and the chaos at the fort in a letter home.

The Fort was not 50 rods from where we landed and it was instantly surrounded by a dripping, yelling, shouting, wheezing, headless rabble. They fired grapeshot and bullets among us, but very few took effect, an instant more, and that portion of the crowd where I was, which was a little to the left of the rear of the Fort, made a rush for the parapet with fixed bayonets. Our bayonets were at the breasts of the nearest men in the Fort, and were all shouting surrender when up came a white handkerchief on a short pole, but just an instant after one of the guns at the other end of the Fort let fly a charge of grape at us, then the boys hollered "shoot them" "kill them" and charged there bayonets into their very throats, but the rebels begged for life, and strange to say not one of them was pricked with a bayonet.... The honor belongs equally to the 8th and 89th, there were not 200 men that charged on the Fort in all, and not more than 25 were on it when it gave in.²⁸

The *Connecticut War Record* praised both units involved in the surprise attack. "Much as I love to praise Connecticut boys, I can say that they were only side by side with the brave boys of the 89th New York. Moved by one purpose along one path, they dashed into the works together, and the two old standards, torn and pierced by bullets in many battles, were planted on the breastworks at one moment, in triumph."²⁹

Lieutenant Lamson noted in his report that the captured guns were originally Union guns the Confederates had captured earlier in Harper's Ferry and western Virginia.³⁰ General Getty's official report summarized the affair: "The capture of 5 guns, 7 officers, and 130 men, the liberation of the five gunboats above, and the occupation of a point of vital importance to the enemy and an admirable point of operations for us were the results of one of the most brilliant achievements of the war. Our loss was 4 killed and 10 wounded."³¹

The prisoners were escorted onto the *Stepping Stones* and deposited at the Wood Yard landing. The rest of the 8th Connecticut and 89th New York set to work hauling off captured guns and ammunition. They were reinforced during the night by the remaining four companies of the Eighth, two of the 9th Vermont, and a portion of the 10th New Hampshire. They also threw up banks around the guns and dug rifle pits. The picket was set out about 40 rods (220 yards). Sergeant William Huntington was on duty after the attack. "I had a pretty tough time the night we stormed Ft. Huger. Had eaten nothing since morning + they would not let us take our Haversacks, Canteens, or Blankets. I stood on my feet + watched for the approach of the Enemy all night + my teeth went so, that if anyone had come near me they would think they were near some kind of Mill Gear."³²

Around 3 a.m. on the next morning, Monday, April 20, bullets started flying, and the pickets came rushing in, some were wounded. Confederate Captain Leigh R. Terrill, the assistant adjutant general to General Evander M. Law, was advancing to retake the fort with two companies of the 48th Alabama. Colonel John K. Connally and his 55th North Carolinians met them on the Riddick property and joined the skirmishing forward, but neither would attack the enemy of unknown strength in the dark.³³

With the help of the gunboats lying near, the Union line was re-established. The 117th New York Regiment was added for reinforcements. The next morning, the Confederates could be seen advancing, but the attack was not made. About noon, the 8th Connecticut and 89th New York boarded the boat and returned to their camps after more than twenty-four hours of action.

Afterwards, Captain Charles Coit, who was part of the reinforcements from the Eighth, complained that the newspapers were giving all the credit for the victory to the New York regiment:

The fort that we surprised + captured a week ago today was evacuated the next day by Genl Peck's order + nothing hinders the enemy from planting other guns on the same point + annoying the gunboats as much as ever. I see the papers as usual give all the credit of taking the battery to the [89th] New York Regt. The battery was taken by both Regts + I have not yet seen a man who ventured to say which flag was in first. All the officers of both Regts were ordered to gather such men as they could of either Regt + not wait to form but rush on + the battery was taken by a rush from each Regt. Col. Ward commanded under Genl Getty.³⁴

The Eighth's losses in this "brilliant little affair" were one killed in Company D, four wounded (one each in Companies B, C, H, and I), and one wounded twice in Company E.³⁵ The 89th New York losses were about the same. The Confederates had none killed or wounded.³⁶

Sergeant William Huntington said he was grieving most of all, since the soldier from the Eighth who was killed had been his tentmate.

Before this reaches you, you will probably get the news of the Gallant work of the Bloody Eighth + the 89th N York Volunteers in Charging on to a Rebel Battery It was a dangerous + exciting piece of work, but it was very quickly done. And it is myself that feels the effect of it more than anyone else in the Regt perhaps, for it has forever taken from me my tent-mate. It is very sad + I can hardly keep the tears back as I write, didn't think much about it at the time when they came + told me [Frank] Jerome was wounded but when I had got back across the

River + had time to think + consider the tears would flow in spite of me very abundantly. His body was embalmed + is going to be sent home. he was the only killed in the Regt.³⁷

Sergeant Seth Plumb said making the attack with a surgeon might have prevented the death of Frank Jerome. "Through some blunder no Doctor went with us, the man that was killed from the 8th bled to death for the want of someone to stop it. His wound was not dangerous otherwise."³⁸

Sergeant William Huntington also included a unique souvenir of the war in his letter home. "Am going to send a piece of our old Flag that got disengaged during the storming of Ft. Huger. It is not very good looking but is very precious must keep it safe."³⁹

The official report from Colonel Ward gave stark testimony to the courage of the fighters at Fort Huger. Ward recounted the orders from General Getty to take men from the 8th Connecticut and the 89th New York, board the *Stepping Stones*, descend quietly to Hill's Point, and then rush the rear of the fort. Ward told of their quick success, and capturing the prize of five guns and 130 prisoners, including seven officers. He described the deployment of skirmishers and the positioning of the captured guns and Navy howitzers to defend the fort from counterattack from the land side. That attack was repulsed the next morning. At the end of his report, Ward listed the losses in the Eighth—one killed, four wounded, and several injuries.⁴⁰

As Croffut and Morris wrote later in *The Military and Civil History Connecticut During the War of 1861–65*, "The coolness and fearlessness of Col. Ward won for him the admiration and abiding confidence of the veterans of his regiment."⁴¹

The Siege Continues

The Eighth settled once again into continued siege operations with fatigue duty on the works and rotating picket duty. Captain Charles Coit described the fatigue



Francis Jerome, killed at Fort Huger (courtesy Tad Sattler Private Collection).