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THE SHARPSHOOTERS

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The Sharpshooters

*A History of the Ninth New Jersey
Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War*

EDWARD G. LONGACRE

POTOMAC BOOKS

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Longacre, Edward G., 1946– author.

Title: The sharpshooters: a history of the Ninth New Jersey Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War / Edward G. Longacre.

Description: Lincoln: Potomac Books, an imprint of the University of Nebraska Press, 2016. |

Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Description based on print version record and CIP data provided by publisher; resource not viewed.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016018626 (print) | LCCN 2016018247 (ebook) | ISBN 9781612348070 (cloth: alk. paper) | ISBN 9781612348834 (epub) | ISBN 9781612348841 (mobi) | ISBN 9781612348858 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: United States. Army. New Jersey Infantry Regiment, 9th (1861–1865) | New Jersey—History—Civil War, 1861–1865—Regimental histories. | United States—History—Civil War, 1861–1865—Regimental histories. | United States—History—Civil War, 1861–1865—Campaigns.

Classification: LCC E521.5 9th (print) | LCC E521.5 9th .L66 2016 (ebook) | DDC 973.7/3—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016018626>

Set in Minion by Westchester Publishing Services.

In memory of
John T. McNulty
(1926–2013)
Past Commander
Joel Searfoss Camp #273
and
Color Bearer Emeritus
Pennsylvania Department
Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book could not have been written without the assistance of various institutions and individuals, each deserving of my gratitude and thanks. Research material came from many sources, including the New Jersey State Archives, the New Jersey Historical Society, the libraries of Rutgers and Princeton Universities, the historical societies of Burlington and Hunterdon Counties, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and the Wilson Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

While I am indebted to the staffs of each of these repositories, I extend particular thanks to Albert C. King, Curator of Manuscripts, Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries, who expedited my search through the hundreds of regimental documents, principally soldiers' correspondence and diaries, contained in the library of the State University of New Jersey. Other persons offered equally valuable assistance. Joseph G. Bilby of Wall Township, New Jersey, a leading light of New Jersey Civil War studies, placed at my disposal a wealth of material gathered during his research for *“Remember You Are Jerseymen”*: A Military History of New Jersey Troops in the Civil War, coauthored with the late William C. Goble and published in 1998. Gilbert V. “Skip” Riddle of Greenville, North Carolina, not only answered my numerous questions about the North Carolina area of operations but gave access to his compilation of contemporary newspaper articles pertaining to the Ninth's service in the Tar Heel State. John Kuhl of Pittstown, New Jersey, provided the majority of the illustrations

from his vast collection of New Jersey Civil War documents and artifacts, as well as copies of the Andrew J. Little letters in the Hunterdon County Historical Society. Bradford Verter of Princeton, New Jersey, lent me copies of the Symmes H. Stillwell letters, excerpts of which were cited in Verter's illuminating article, "Disconsolations of a Jersey Muskrat," published in the *Princeton University Library Chronicle* for Winter 1997. Still others who rendered research assistance include Tom Ankner, Newark, New Jersey; Joseph M. "Marty" Boa, Tinton Falls, New Jersey; Brett Bondurant, Raleigh, North Carolina; Bill Godfrey, Hampton, Virginia; Willard B. Green, Carneys Point, New Jersey; Philip Koether, New York City; David Martin, Hightstown, New Jersey; John M. McNulty, Glenside, Pennsylvania; Laura Mosher of the United States Military Academy Library, West Point, New York; Tom Mullusky of the Gilder Lehrman Institute, New York City; and Steve Shaffer, New Bern, North Carolina.

It should go without saying that none of these persons is responsible for the themes, interpretations, or conclusions of the author.

INTRODUCTION

Civil War unit histories can provide invaluable insight into the dynamics of mid-nineteenth-century soldier life. The best examples of the genre convey to the reader what the fighting men, North and South, experienced, processed, and remembered: hunger, thirst, fatigue, sickness, physical and psychological pain, the comforts of comradeship, of being part of a corporate endeavor in a worthy cause; the alternating routine and chaos of military duty; the terrifying sights, sounds, and smells of combat. It takes time, however, to provide perspective, balance, and context to soldiers' reminiscences. Those histories written soon after war's end by the veterans themselves tended to produce a highly romanticized picture of regimental life and military service. Men known for their unsavory character or unsoldierly conduct were, in a sense, missing in action. The writers filled their pages, instead, with high-toned expressions of patriotism, vignettes of officers and men acting nobly in a noble cause, dramatic depictions of courage under fire, and poignant examples of hardships stoically endured in furtherance of national or sectional goals.

There were, of course, exceptions to this rule. These include the two published histories of the Ninth New Jersey Volunteers, compiled by former members of the regiment, Pvt. Hermann Everts in 1865 and Lt. J. Madison Drake, twenty-four years later. Both works, which contain an almost day-by-day account of regimental activities and a more or less complete roster of officers and men, are treasure troves of

information for latter-day historians. Drake's much larger volume also includes copies of official reports, veterans' reminiscences, biographies of notable officers and men, and other pertinent material.¹

Not surprisingly, the veteran-historians highlighted the military prowess of the Ninth and the virtues of its soldiers. Yet neither depicts the Ninth as a bastion of exemplary intent or pristine conduct. The authors are unusually candid in describing soldiers who ran amok, looting the property of army sutlers and enemy civilians—upon occasion, though usually by order, torching the homes of avowed secessionists. Everts and Drake hinted at a few officers and men who failed to measure up to the expectations of their comrades and their government. And they pulled few punches when characterizing members of the high command for whom the Ninth had little regard. For example, while the regiment applauded Ulysses S. Grant's rise to command of all the forces of the Union in the spring of 1864, it did not think much of the strategy he applied to those campaigns in which the Ninth participated and suffered heavily. When their corps came under command of William T. Sherman during the closing weeks of the war in North Carolina, the soldiers of the Ninth clearly preferred serving under "Uncle Billy."

But candor has its limits. Everts and Drake chose to overlook some of the more objectionable qualities and activities of those who followed the flag of the Ninth New Jersey through three years and ten months of arduous, debilitating, and often exasperating campaigning. They generally ignored the enlisted men who shirked duty, got drunk on a regular basis, and quarreled and fought with comrades over sundry matters. Nor did they identify the officers who administered needlessly harsh discipline, tended to their own comfort at the expense of their men, and hid behind trees during battle. Such traits characterized every body of fighting men, Union or Confederate. If Everts and Drake downplayed them it was undoubtedly due to a desire to avoid offending still-living comrades and to spare their families from chagrin and embarrassment.

A major theme missing from both works, although hinted at more than a few times, was the generally low opinion the men of the regiment entertained toward the enemy's people. They regarded the poorly clothed, poorly armed, underfed soldiers of the Confederacy as ragamuffins and scarecrows even as they praised their fighting spirit and combat performance. They were scarcely less disdainful of Southern civilians, most of whom they considered slovenly, dissipated, and dense. Yet these views paled in comparison to their distaste for the great majority of the African Americans they met in large numbers almost everywhere they were stationed.

Race prejudice was not the exclusive possession of the officers and men of the Ninth New Jersey. It could be found in every Union regiment, even those from New England, a wellspring of abolitionism and other liberal causes. Yet the Negrophobic attitudes of the Ninth were unusually consistent and the soldiers especially vocal in expressing them. Although they approved of the freemen and runaway slaves who provided enemy intelligence; sought employment as guides, teamsters, and officers' servants; and succored escaped prisoners, the regiment derided most black civilians as "pampered," "sassy," "fat, well-dressed and indolent," the undeserving beneficiaries of government-fostered "negroism." The black soldiers they encountered in the Carolinas and Virginia they denounced as poorly disciplined and skittish under fire, often a disgrace to the uniform they shared with their white comrades. For the unwanted presence of United States Colored Troops (USCT) they blamed Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Referring to that document, a member of the Ninth declared that "there is scarcely a man in the ranks . . . who approved of it" and did not wish to see it rescinded. One member of the Ninth put it plainly in a letter published in a Newark newspaper a few weeks after the proclamation took effect: "Who ever heard of a Jersey man and a nigger living in harmony together?"²

The regiment's scorn peaked in early 1863, when it served under Maj. Gen. David Hunter, a Virginia-born abolitionist whose support of black

troops antagonized the majority white soldiers of his Department of the South. When transferred to Virginia for the 1864 campaigns, the men of the Ninth gave only slightly more allegiance to Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, another prominent patron of black men in uniform. Late that summer, however, when the USCT began to shoulder a greater share of the combat burden and proved themselves to be competent soldiers and staunch fighters, regimental perceptions of their right to bear arms began to moderate. Even so, numerous members of the rank-and-file clung to preconceived attitudes of African American inferiority.

This much said, Private Everts and Captain Drake were entirely justified in highlighting the valor and skill of the soldiers of the Ninth. Arguably the most distinguished of the forty regiments of infantry New Jersey contributed to the Union armies—the only one to reenlist, at the close of its three-year service term, for the duration of the conflict—the Ninth saw action in forty-two battles and engagements, lost 261 of its officers and men to combat wounds or disease, and marched or sailed some 7,600 miles through three states in the performance of its duties. Recruited as a sharpshooter unit and clothed in distinctive uniforms of green trim, the handpicked regiment is said to have outperformed in target competition a team from Berdan's Sharpshooters, the most celebrated marksmen in the Union ranks. In battle the Ninth's firepower took a heavy toll of every Confederate unit opposed to it. Present-day historians have characterized the regiment as “one of the most unique military units ever to serve under the state of New Jersey's banner,” while lamenting that the story of “the outdoorsmen and target shooters of the Ninth . . . was largely lost to the general public during the war and afterward. . . . Then and now, they have always deserved better.”³

One reason for the regiment's unjustified neglect is that it did most of its soldiering in North Carolina. The war in that department has long been overlooked; given its strategic influence on other, more well-publicized theaters of operations, it merits greater attention. As historian John G. Barrett has noted, Gen. Robert E. Lee's well-documented operations in Virginia “were controlled to a large extent by conditions

in North Carolina. The historian's failure to record adequately the fighting in the Tar Heel state, therefore, has left incomplete the story not only of the conflict in North Carolina but of the larger war in the eastern theater."⁴

Well-publicized or not, the Ninth New Jersey distinguished itself almost as soon as it took the field as a member of Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside's expedition against the Carolina coast. In its first two battles—Roanoke Island (February 8, 1862) and New Bern (March 14)—the regiment attacked through waist-deep swamps considered impenetrable by the enemy and helped make the Confederates' position untenable. For its marked ability to simultaneously swim and fight the regiment won the enduring nickname "Jersey Muskrats."

Historical inattention can also be traced to the Ninth's later service in two other secondary theaters of operations: Charleston, South Carolina, in the spring of 1863, where naval blundering produced a failed attempt to capture that historic city, and Southside Virginia in mid-1864, where Butler's ill-starred Army of the James attempted to seize the enemy capital at Richmond. Under Butler's erratic leadership the regiment—now christened the Ninth New Jersey Veteran Volunteers—took part in a series of poorly conceived and mismanaged engagements. The deadliest of these took place at Drewry's Bluff, south of Richmond, on May 16, where the regiment was placed on the far right of its army, a mile from the banks of the James River. When thousands of Confederates bypassed the unanchored flank on that foggy morning, the Ninth was surrounded and overwhelmed. It suffered heavier casualties in this fight than in any other engagement. During the month of May alone it lost two officers and sixteen enlisted men killed in action, two officers and 153 men wounded (several mortally), and three officers and fifty-five men missing, most of them captured. The majority of the latter would die of disease or starvation at Andersonville and other prison camps in the Deep South.

After enduring the discomforts and hazards of life in the trenches at Cold Harbor and Petersburg, the Ninth was returned to North Carolina

to recruit its strength. Brought back to fighting trim by an influx of recruits, substitutes, and a minimum of draftees, it served with consummate skill through the last eight months of the war. Generals who praised the Ninth as their “right arm” and “the flower” of their commands consistently gave it the post of greatest importance and danger during field movements and expeditions. By the time of its discharge in July 1865 the Ninth had fairly won its reputation as the most honored regiment New Jersey sent to the war. Its story deserves to be told again, in greater detail and broader context than in 1865 and 1889.