

Eleventh Corps Unit Profiles: 54th New York Volunteer Infantry

Even the most casual student of the American Civil War knows of the Eleventh Army Corps' Germanic aspect. By 1863 only half of its regiments were German or foreign-born in their makeup, yet by then the uncomplimentary "Dutch" moniker had taken hold, never to disappear. While it is not especially accurate to broadly paint the Eleventh as a German outfit – particularly when referring to the Gettysburg timeframe – there are of course valid reasons why it continues to be viewed as such. Europe was well-represented in the senior staff of the corps, with foreign-born officers commanding two of its three divisions and three of its six infantry brigades. And if half of the Eleventh was not German, the other half certainly was. The latter force consisted primarily of New York and Pennsylvania regiments that had been raised in 1861 as part of a vision for a Germanic division to serve in the Army of the Potomac, to be commanded by Brig. Gen. Louis Blenker, veteran of the Bavarian army and the revolutions of 1848. Blenker's division quickly became a showpiece organization, and in early March of 1862 it was assigned to the Second Corps. How different its history and reputation might have been had it retained that association, but fate unfortunately intervened.

Instead of heading to the Peninsula with the Second Corps, Blenker's twelve regiments and three batteries were ordered to reinforce Maj. Gen. John C. Frémont's command in western Virginia. The move was a hurried affair, and the Germans marched west without maps or guides, without most of their baggage, and apparently without much of an understanding as to their destination. The division, which ought to have reached Frémont in a week or so, seemed to vanish into the mountains; no one heard from Blenker for weeks. When Brig. Gen. William S. Rosecrans was dispatched to find the wayward command it took him several days to do so, and he was shocked at the condition he found it in, reporting the division, "short of provisions, forage, horseshoes and horseshoe nails, clothing, shoes, stockings, picket ropes and ammunition, without tents or shelters, and without ambulances or medicines." The Germans were emaciated, many hundreds were sick from exposure and disease, and the whole command needed something like a lengthy vacation to recover from the fiasco. They weren't going to get it, for "Stonewall" Jackson was making trouble that spring, and Frémont's forces went on the offensive against the Rebel general almost immediately.¹

Blenker's men entered their first significant battle at Cross Keys on June 8. Several of the German regiments were roughly handled in a badly-managed action during which Frémont demonstrated an awesome inability to properly use his resources. Weeks of marching and skirmishing followed as the Pathfinder fruitlessly chased Jackson up and down the Valley while the men in the ranks became increasingly aware that they were being poorly led. By early July Frémont was gone, replaced by the immensely popular Maj. Gen. Franz Sigel, who now commanded the new incarnation of his predecessor's force, known as the First Corps of the Army of Virginia. Sigel's corps contained Blenker's Germans (without Blenker, who had sustained a serious injury during a fall, an injury that ended his military career and led to his death the following year), as well as several Ohio and West Virginia regiments that had also fought in the Valley; the new corps greatly resembled its eventual successor, the Eleventh. Sigel led his command into battle at Second Bull Run on August 29, where his Third Division conducted an assault

on Gregg's South Carolina brigade in an unfinished railroad cut. One of the regiments that participated in the attack was the 54th New York. After a deadly exchange of musketry the 54th along with the 58th New York successfully drove part of the Carolina brigade out of a wood in front of the cut. ²

The 54th had been in service since October of the previous year, having been recruited in New York City, "consisting", as one of its veterans later remarked, "exclusively of Germans, many of whom had seen service in their native land." Yet it was not entirely German, for the regiment's first commanding officer was a Hungarian, Col. Eugene Kozlay. Kozlay, like so many other Eleventh Corps officers, was a political refugee, having fought as an officer in the Hungarian revolutionary forces during that nation's abortive War of Liberation in 1848-1849. After fleeing his native land he wound up in New York by the mid-1850s. Fluent in German and Slovak as well as Hungarian, he possessed sufficient popularity and influence that he was entrusted with the task of recruiting and leading a regiment. ³

The 54th possessed two nicknames: the Hiram Barney Rifles (after the powerful New York City Republican) and the Schwarzer Jäger (Black Rifles) on account of their silver-trimmed black uniforms, copied from that of Lutzow's famous volunteer unit of the Napoleonic wars. Kozlay's regiment also procured what must have been one of the war's most unique regimental flags, having a black silk field "embroidered in silver with a skull and crossbones." Unfortunately the flag "was not sanctioned by the authorities; and therefore was afterwards discarded." By August, 1862 the fancy uniforms were gone too, as were many of the men who had worn them; but the remaining veterans fought well at Second Bull Run, ending the battle as part of the rear guard for Sigel's corps. The 54th lost 161 officers and men at the battle, the bloodiest fight of the war for the regiment. ⁴

For the next eight months the 54th and their parent corps saw plenty of campaigning but little serious combat. After Second Bull Run the short-lived Army of Virginia was disbanded, and Sigel's corps became the Army of the Potomac's Eleventh. Along with the Third Corps, the Eleventh occupied the defenses of Washington while the rest of the army fought at Antietam. At Fredericksburg Sigel's command was not engaged. The next serious test for the 54th would be at Chancellorsville.

May 2, 1863 is without doubt the most important date in the history of the Eleventh Corps, for it was on that day that the reputation of the corps was permanently ruined. Sigel, of course, was no longer in command, having resigned after quarrels with Hooker and Halleck. In his place, and facing his first test as a corps commander, was Maj. Gen. Oliver O. Howard. Howard's divisions held positions in a densely wooded area and constituted the army's right flank. That flank was highly vulnerable to a potential surprise attack, and Hooker had warned Howard about strengthening that end of the corps line, advice the latter officer elected to ignore. Thus it was that when thousands of Confederate infantrymen burst out of the thickets near 6:00 pm, only two regiments initially faced the assault: the green 153rd Pennsylvania, and, forming the right of the entire corps, the veterans of the 54th New York, now led by Lt. Col. Charles Ashby (a rare non-German). Their brigade commander, Col. Leopold von Gilsa, reacted quickly but his men never had a chance. Overlapped on its flanks, the 54th buckled under the onslaught. Three color-bearers went down in quick succession, Ashby was taken prisoner, and after a brief resistance and 43 casualties the regiment and Von Gilsa's

brigade was swept away, along with the reputation of the German soldier in the Army of the Potomac.⁵

Cruel fate once again conspired against the 54th two months later when Von Gilsa's brigade went into position on Blocher's Knoll on the afternoon of July 1. Brig. Gen. Francis Barlow ordered Von Gilsa to advance and occupy the aforementioned high ground. Barlow soon followed with the rest of his tiny division and placed his regiments for defense. The 54th deployed as skirmishers along Rock Creek under the watchful eye of Maj. Stephen Kovacs (like his predecessor Kozlay, Kovacs was a Hungarian émigré). Numbering just 189 officers and men, the regiment's right rested near the bridge over that waterway while the left extended toward the grove that ran along the northern slope of the knoll. For the second time in two months the Schwarzer Jäger found themselves on the far end of the corps line in a desperately exposed position when Maj. Gen. Jubal Early's division barreled into them just after 3:00 p.m. While it is most assuredly not the duty of a skirmish line to stand and die in the face of an enemy's determined assault, the men of the 54th must have made a stubborn, albeit brief resistance. One of their opponents, Pvt. G. W. Nichols of the 61st Georgia, recounted how he and his comrades "advanced with our accustomed yell, but they stood firm until we got near them. They then began to retreat in fine order, shooting at us as they retreated. They were harder to drive than we had ever known them before." Within minutes, however, the retreat of Von Gilsa's regiments became a confused affair as the Confederates pushed their advantage. Major Kovacs was taken prisoner in the ensuing chaos. When the defense of Blocher's Knoll collapsed several officers, including Von Gilsa, attempted to cobble together a new line at the Almshouse, but when once again the division was forced to fall back, order and organization began to disintegrate until the survivors reached Cemetery Hill.⁶

July 2 found the remnant of the 54th along the base of East Cemetery Hill, the truncated regiment now under the leadership of Lt. Ernst Both. Both's men suffered under the harassing fire of enemy sharpshooters throughout the day, and the regiment was still in this position when it was struck by the attack of two of Early's brigades late that evening. The New Yorkers briefly held the Confederate attack; Color Sgt. Heinrich Michel fell with a mortal wound to his head, and two successive color bearers were wounded. Before long, they were driven up the slope, managing a confused rally atop the crest. When Second and Eleventh Corps reinforcements arrived to restore the situation, what little remained of Lt. Both's command again took up position along the base of the hill. The 54th had lost, in two very short actions, 102 officers and men, some fifty-four percent of the regiment. Only two, one of them Kovacs, were reported as prisoners.⁷

By August, 1863 the 54th's association with the Army of the Potomac was over, for their division was detached from that army and sent to participate in the siege operations at Charleston, SC. One and a half years later the regiment was still there, entering the defeated city in March, 1865. The 54th had had a hard war, and had been at ground zero for the Eleventh Corps' two great disasters. Yet when the War Department asked the veterans to reenlist at the beginning of 1864, the great majority of them – soldiers who had been led from one fiasco to another, who the army blamed for its defeats – did so with a determination to see the war through to the end. No better comment can be made as to the true fighting spirit of this largely forgotten regiment.

Notes:

1. *O.R. Series I, Vol. XII, Pt. 3, pp. 81, 82, 186-187*
2. *O.R. Series I, Vol. XII, Pt. 1, pp. 671-672; Pt. 2, pp. 311-312, 314-315, 685.*
3. *N.Y.G.B. Vol. 1 pp. 402-403; E. A. Kozlay biographical sketch (n.p.), author's file.*
4. *N.Y.G.B. Vol. 1 pp. 402-403; O. R. Series I, Vol. XII, pt. 2, p. 251.*
5. *O.R. Series I, Vol. 25, Pt. 1 pp. 182, 636; "National Officers Prisoners in Richmond," New York Times, May 12, 1863; N.Y.G.B. Vol. 1, pp. 404.*
6. Edmund J. Raus, Jr. *A Generation on the March: The Union Army at Gettysburg.* Lynchburg, VA 1987, p. 62; G. W. Nichols, *A Soldier's Story of His Regiment and Incidentally of the Lawton-Gordon-Evans Brigade, Army of Northern Virginia.* Jessup, GA 1898, p. 116.
7. Raus, *Generation*, p. 62; *N.Y.G.B. Vol. 1, p. 404.*