



SEPT. 17, 1862: BLOODIEST DAY IN AMERICAN HISTORY

BY DAN 'JAKE' KOCH



Provided photo/DAN 'JAKE' KOCH

The 8th Ohio Monument at Antietam National Battlefield, with Bloody Lane directly behind it and the ground over which the 8th Ohio attacked in the background.

Over the course of 12 hours on Sept. 17, 1862, the nation's costliest war produced the bloodiest day in American history, along Antietam Creek in western Maryland.

At the end of the day, more than 23,000 Americans — in both blue and gray — had been killed, wounded, or captured. In comparison, about 6,500 Americans died

on D-Day in 1944. The battle stopped the first attempt by the South to invade the North.

Two days beforehand, part of the Confederate invasion force under Stonewall Jackson had forced the surrender of the Union garrison of 12,500 men at Harpers Ferry, in what would be the largest capitulation of U.S. troops until the fall of Corregidor to the Japanese in 1942. The campaign's aftermath left a path of damaged equipment, and damaged men. Those suffering on the field would be aided in part by Clara Barton, a volunteer nurse who would go on to found the American Red Cross. The battle would also give President Lincoln the perfect opportunity to announce the Emancipation Proclamation, which forever freed all slaves in areas controlled by the rebels.

At least two regiments with Erie County ties fought at the Battle of Antietam: the 7th and 8th Ohio Infantry regiments. Company E of the 7th was from Huron, while Company E of the 8th was from Sandusky. Although not from Erie County, Company D of the 8th was raised in Norwalk and commanded by Franklin Sawyer, a Norwalk lawyer. Each regiment would see heavy fighting during the engagement at different locations on the battlefield.

The 7th fought in the early part of the day, attacking the Confederates at about 7:30 a.m. The division, led by Gen. George Greene, fought its way through the East Woods and drove the Confederates defending the position to Dunker Church. From there, the Ohioans came under tremendous fire from the West Woods, forcing them to withdraw from the area. The 7th was relatively lucky, suffering five dead and 38 wounded.

The Huron men of Company E were even more fortunate, having just two wounded — Daniel Weatherlow and David Everett.

The 8th Ohio would be more heavily engaged than the 7th. They were involved in the Union attack on the Confederate line defending a sunken lane, a country road that had been eroded over the years by farm use. The lane made a natural defensive trench for the Confederates. By

the end of the day it would be known as Bloody Lane. The 8th went into battle that day with the memory of the morning prior, when the men had been laying on their arms, awaiting orders.

Confederate artillery had them within range. A well-placed, solid shot found Cpl. William Farmer, of Huron County — at the front of the regiment — serving as the color bearer. Farmer was nearly cut in two by the projectile in front of the entire regiment, dying immediately.

As the Division moved forward on the morning of the Sept. 17, the attack stalled after capturing the buildings of the Roulette Farm and driving the Confederate troops to the ridgeline behind. The brigade containing the 8th Ohio launched an attack to drive the Rebel forces from the ridge. The regiment moved forward, marching shoulder to shoulder. They advanced under heavy rifle and canister fire. The canister is an artillery projectile made up of a tin can filled with 27 cast-iron balls, an inch-and-a-half in diameter, which essentially turned cannons into giant shotguns. The brigade drove the Confederates from the ridge into the sunken farm lane below. The two lines slugged away at each other, trading small arms fire, with the Union soldiers of the 8th on the ridgeline and the rebels in the natural trench below them.

The firing went on so long that the supply of ammunition was exhausted. Officers and sergeants cut the cartridge boxes from the mounting number of dead and wounded, so those still fighting could continue shooting. The muzzle-loading black powder weapons used by the troops soon fouled because of the volume of firing. Many took advantage of the ever-increasing dead and wounded at hand, replacing their weapons by taking them from those who could no longer use them. They fired and were fired upon, the casualties on both sides continued to rise.

When the firing from the lane slackened, a new threat developed: A large Confederate force appeared to their right. The 8th Ohio and their comrades of the 14th Indiana changed their front to face the new Confederate force. They were able to beat their foe into position and immediately fired a volley, which sent the new attack reeling. As they had changed fronts, the regiment took possession of a portion of the sunken lane, capturing more than 200 prisoners from among the surviving Confederates, most of whom were wounded.

The 8th Ohio and the rest of the Brigade were finally relieved at about 1:30 p.m. and pulled off the line, after more than four hours of relentless combat. As a result of their tough attack and stand, they and the other regiments of their brigade earned the sobriquet of the “Gibraltar Brigade.” Still, they had paid dearly for the victory.

The 8th Ohio had 162 officers and men killed and wounded during the fight, which was more than half their total number engaged. Company E, composed of men from Sandusky, would fare comparatively lucky, with only one soldier — Pvt. Franklin Trube—among the slain. Lieutenants Alfred T. Craig and William T. Witherell, Cpl. Frank L. Soeffing, and Privates Peter Epp, Henry D.C. Mills, Merrill L. Starr, and Fayette Wolcott all received wounds. Soeffing, Epp, Mills, Starr, and Wolcott would all be discharged from the Army, given the severity of their wounds.

While the American Civil War would rage on for two and a half more years, no day would see more bloodshed than Sept. 17, 1862. More of the recently estimated 800,000 fatalities of the Civil War lost their lives that day than on any other.

For more information on the Antietam Campaign, visit the website for Antietam National Battlefield, a unit of the National Park Service at nps.gov/anti/index.htm.

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