



1864 left nation bloodied

BY DANIEL KOCH

Historians have stated for decades the American Civil War, this country's bloodiest, resulted in 620,000 fatalities. If the same percentage of today's population would be lost it would result in about six million lives lost. Even more staggering, recent research has shown the number of deaths resulting from the war may in fact be much higher, closer to 800,000. The Civil War, like every war prior to the First World War, would lose more men to disease than to combat.



Few communities — North or South — were left untouched, Sandusky included.

The bloodiest year was 1864. Northern armies under the leadership of Ohioan Ulysses S. Grant were keeping pressure on the Confederates on all fronts. May was perhaps the worst month of the entire war with over 80,000 casualties, alone. By comparison, it is about 25,000 more casualties than the military has suffered since the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan began in late 2001.

It's a staggering number: 80,000 casualties in one month compared to about 58,000 in thirteen years.

Troops from the city of Sandusky and Erie County as a whole were involved that month in every theatre of operations in 12 different combat units. The 72nd Ohio was involved in operations in Mississippi. The German immigrants of the 107th Ohio operated in Florida after the mauling they received at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg the previous year. The 1st Ohio Heavy Artillery was stretched across Tennessee guarding railroads. The 8th Ohio was heavily engaged at the Battles of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania Courthouse in Virginia as a part of General Grant's Overland Campaign.

The majority of Erie County men were involved in General Sherman's Atlanta Campaign spread amongst the 3rd Ohio Cavalry, and the 7th, 24th, 55th, 64th, 65th, and 101st Ohio Infantries. In May 1864, the 8th Ohio Infantry's Company E and the Huron and Erie County Men of Companies A, C, D, and I of the 55th Ohio suffer the the most severe losses.

The 55th's losses included the death of its much-loved colonel, Charles Gambee, a native of Bellevue who now rests in the Bellevue Cemetery.

Yet another Ohio infantry regiment with Erie County men, the 123rd Ohio, was engaged that same May. They had the bad luck of being captured in whole during the Gettysburg Campaign of the previous summer, and all of them spent time as prisoners of the Confederates before being exchanged. For most of their service, as well as the spring of 1864 they operated within the confines of the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Their campaigns of that month were overshadowed by those of some of the other regiments.

But they also deserve to have their story told.

On May 15, 1864, the regiment fought at the Battle of New Market, Va., in the small Union Army under the command of Gen. Franz Sigel. Unfortunately, the regiment's bad luck from the previous year carried over, and they, along with the entire force, was routed. The battle is well known in Virginia lore to this day because the Corps

of Cadets of the Virginia Military Institute took part, with 10 young cadets being killed or mortally wounded in the action.

The 123rd Ohio, with Company G and a portion of Company K made up of Erie County men took heavy casualties, losing 63 men killed or wounded with another 26 missing. Although a small battle by Civil War standards, it was quite furious with the regimental history stating that when they moved through the area one month later “we examined this spot, and found scarce a tree or bush unmarked, showing that the fire at this point must have been severe indeed.”

Sigel would be replaced by Gen. David Hunter. Hunter would lead the same army again including the 123rd Ohio deep into the valley hoping to destroy Confederate logistics in Lynchburg in what became known as the Lynchburg Raid. He would be forced to retreat through the rugged terrain of West Virginia after a larger Confederate force showed up, with many of the Union troops shoeless following a miserable march on short rations.

Ironically, the Erie County and Sandusky men of the 123rd likely marched past the home known as Sandusky, which served as General Hunter’s headquarters while he was in Lynchburg. It received its name from its builder, Charles Johnston. Johnston had been captured along the Ohio River by Shawnees in 1790 and held captive in the Sandusky area for a time. In another twist, the Civil War era owner of the home, George C. Hutter, had a son captured at the Battle of Gettysburg who would be confined in Johnson’s Island POW Camp in Sandusky Bay.

The luck of the regiment and Union fortunes in the Shenandoah Valley would change that fall when yet another Ohioan, Gen. Philip H. Sheridan, would take command of Union forces in the area and launch a devastating campaign destroying anything of military value to the Confederacy. He famously made the comment to Gen. Grant that “if a crow wants to fly down the Shenandoah, he must carry his provisions with him.”

Sheridan would defeat the Confederate forces in the area at the Battle of Cedar Creek, which along with the capture of Atlanta by Gen. Sherman would ensure the re-election of President Lincoln that fall.

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