

The Battle of New Market Reenactment: The Tradition Continues: 1914-2020

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Staunton, Va., May 10, 1864

Maj. Gen. F. H. Smith, Supt. VMI:

Sigel is moving up the Valley--was at Strasburg last night. I cannot tell you whether this is his destination. I would be glad to have your assistance at once with the cadets and the section of artillery. Bring all the forage and rations you can . . .

Yours respectfully,

John C. Breckinridge, Major General.

With these few words, the Virginia Military Institute and the Battle of New Market are irrevocably linked. That spring of 1864 the stakes were higher than they had ever been and so were the expectations; not like previous years when the classroom monotony was occasionally broken up by an up-country march after Union cavalry. But still, youthful bravado reigned supreme at V.M.I. and many saw the barracks as less than glorious. Major General Breckinridge required their battalion to bolster his understrength force of only about 5,000 men. His opponent, Major General Franz Sigel, and his seemingly limitless force of almost 9,000 men were heading south--up the valley.

The cadets joined Breckinridge's army in Staunton, where seasoned veterans greeted the schoolboys with jeers and suspicion while the young ladies of the local female Seminary greeted them with smiles and a grand ball. Cadets danced on tired and blistered feet, little thinking that battle and death loomed only a few days in their future.

In the early morning hours of May 15, 1864, Colonel Scott Shipp's battalion of cadets lumbered groggily towards the small hamlet of New Market. Here they waited an eternity until the sun was high overhead and they finally received orders to advance against the Union line in front of them. Though undoubtedly the best-drilled troops on the field, only a few cadets had experienced real combat—"seen the elephant" as the veterans called it. The average age among of the Corps was 18 years; the youngest was barely 15 years old.

The severity of battle is no respecter of persons. By mid-afternoon, the battalion could see the Union line on Bushong's Hill. General Sigel attempted to capitalize on a break in the Confederate line by moving his troops forward. His infantry attack was repulsed when the break was filled by the VMI Cadet Corps and other reserve units. Now the entire Confederate line stormed across a rain-soaked wheat field—the Field of Lost Shoes. The cadets wrestled a cannon away from Von Kleiser's Battery B, 30th NY after a brief but decisive period of close quarter fighting. By end of the day, the battalion had suffered 47 wounded out of 257, with five dying and five more succumbing to their wounds later on.

New Market's battle was not large when compared to Gettysburg or Shiloh but nonetheless, it was important and inspirational. One of the most fitting memorials of the cadet charge came from Captain Franklin Town, a Union veteran of the battle.

"As a military spectacle it was most beautiful, and as a deed of war it was most grand. When such young men fall in a cause in which they believe, whether it is intrinsically right or wrong, one may realize the sadness of cutting off a life so full of promise, yet all—those who approved and those who opposed the cause they died for—will accord them the tribute of sincere respect and admiration. I don't believe the history of war contains the record of a deed more chivalrous, more daring, or more honorable, than the charge of these boys to a victory which veterans might well boast."

Virginia scholar Douglas Southall Freeman concluded, "Seldom did a small victory have so large an effect. Had not Sigel been driven back when he was, the Valley of Virginia might have been occupied by the Federals before the wheat crop was harvested...Short as was the time saved by the Battle of New Market, it was invaluable."

Members of the Cadet Battalion went on to serve on other fields until the smoke finally cleared and scars of battle were hidden by time, leaving only legacy and memory. The Cadet Cemetery at VMI carefully preserved the final resting place of five of the 10 fallen cadets until a more fitting monument could be made. Remarkably this memorial was made by one of their own--a veteran of New Market, Cadet Moses J. Ezekiel. Ezekiel created "Virginia Mourning Her Dead" in 1904 with its mournful figure of Virginia standing a somber guard over the cadet remains.

On May 15, 1914, VMI and the nation commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the battle with a day-long slate of events at New Market, including VMI's first reenactment of the battle.

According to the May 21, 1914 edition of the Shenandoah Valley newspaper, "Early the anniversary day the town filled up and ran over. The crowd is variously estimated at from 6,000

to 8,000 people. They came from all parts of the country--on the trains, in vehicles, on foot, horseback, and in automobiles-probably 400 or 500 automobiles motored in..."

VMI brought 327 cadets under the leadership of Commandant COL Jennings C. Wise, son of deceased New Market Cadet John S. Wise. He led them in stages from the town center up to Bushong's Farm, pausing only when explanation of the action required it. Spectators also followed but at a respectful distance. A Shenandoah Valley newspaperman remembered, "As the cadet corps marched over the field of battle... crowds viewed the spectacular parade from the rear end of the dwellings, lots, fields and Valley Turnpike to the east."

What was not soon forgotten was the recreation of the cadet charge when Col Wise ordered his line to halt, kneel and fire two volleys towards the now vacant Union line. His orders were heard a good distance away-"Fix Bayonets! Charge! Double-Time! March", and up the hill, they went as their gray-clad forbearers once did. Ceremonies, speeches, and a public parade ended a once in a lifetime day for thousands including 27 New Market Cadets-witnesses to the action a half-century ago.

This would not be the last day when crowds descended on the town and the air was rent once again with the crack of the rifle. On September 20, 1923, Brig.-Gen Smedley Butler brought 3500 United States Marines to New Market for the first modern reenactment on the battlefield. The Marines stood in for General Sigel's Union troops and the VMI Cadets reprised the role of their forbearers a half-century ago. According to a souvenir postcard the crowds were estimated at over 100,000 and the number of automobiles had also increased exponentially. This too would be a once in a lifetime event remembering the valor of VMI's youthful cadets and the soldiery blue and gray.

The guns fell silent at New Market for 41 years until another commemoration approached. In 1961 Virginia and the nation remembered the start of the American Civil War with films, programs, and reenactments, but these were not the reenactments of almost a half-century ago. Participants prided themselves on using Civil War fashions, weaponry and attention to detail on the field. On May 15, 1964, reenactors and spectators once again arrived on the old field to see and learn about the Battle of New Market. The Centennial reenactment was a modest event by today's standards; it shows nonetheless that interest in reenactments has never really gone away at New Market. Over the next fifty years, the site continued to host an annual reenactment on the grounds with hundreds of reenactors claiming New Market as their first event in the hobby-their trial by fire.

Now fast forward to the year 2014, the 150th Anniversary of the Battle of New Market. The Virginia Military Institute marked the anniversary with one of the biggest and most solemn events of the year-the New Market Day Ceremony. The cadets in their parade finest passed in the review and later placed a wreath over six of the fallen cadets buried on campus. Each name is spoken followed by an echo, "Died on the Field of Honor".

On May 16-18, the park held a commemorative reenactment on the same ground that was used in 1914. The events were well attended each day and the weather was almost identical to that of the

battle those many years ago. Troops waded through several feet of water that weekend to the resounding cheers of watching spectators.

This year marks the 156th Anniversary and VMI and the Virginia Museum of the Civil War are well positioned to tell this important story to a new generation of cadets, history enthusiasts, reenactors and spectators alike. The park begins the event by offering a guided tour of the battlefield from 2:00-4:00 on May 15th, with the reenactment proper running from Saturday the 16th –Sunday the 17th. For more information contact the Virginia Museum of the Civil War at 866.515.1864 toll-free or visit our website at www.vmi.edu/newmarket. Join us and have fun for the day and make memories for a lifetime.