

ALL FOR THE UNION: SECOND R.I. SHOWED ITS METTLE

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Editor's Note: This is part of a biweekly series on Rhode Island's role in the Civil War by former Sun staff writer Sam Simons.

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First in; last out. It sounds like an accounting term, but it could have been the rallying cry of the 2nd Rhode Island infantry regiment during the Civil War.

Early in the morning of July 21, 1861, at the first battle of Bull Run (also known as Manassas), the 2nd R.I. became the first Union unit to engage the Confederates forces. Later that day, as the Federal army fled the field in disarray, the 2nd acted as rearguard and was among the last to leave the field.

"The 2nd R.I. fought singlehandedly for half an hour until the rest of the brigade arrived," said Jim Burgess, a battlefield interpreter at Manassas National Battlefield Park.

"It would be a disservice to the other units to say that the 2nd was the only one that didn't run away," Burgess continued, "but they were certainly among the last to leave."

Bull Run was the first major battle of the Civil War and no one on either side was ready for the brutality of the war that had just started. Americans were so unprepared for the reality of modern warfare that many civilians drove out in carriages to watch the spectacle of nearly 70,000 men engaged in mortal struggle.

The soldiers were just as unprepared as the civilians. Elisha Hunt Rhodes noted in his diary, which was published in 1985 as "All For The Union," and featured in the Ken Burns film "The Civil War."

"The men [amused] themselves with laughter and jokes, with occasional stops for berries. One of our boys fell off a fence and broke his bayonet. This caused some amusement, for even at this time we did not realize that we were about to engage in battle."

The 2nd Rhode Island, led the advance of Col. Ambrose B. Burnside's brigade toward the steep banked stream known as Bull Run. Behind them were three more brigades joining in the attempt to outflank the Confederate left by fording the stream at Sudley Springs. Unfortunately for E.H. Rhodes and the rest of the regiment from Rhode Island, a full brigade of Southerners stood ready as they emerged onto Matthews Hill.

For half an hour, the 700 men of the 2nd R.I., led by Col. John S. Slocum and Maj. Sullivan Ballou and supported by the Rhode Island Battery of six cannons, fought alone against nearly 5,000 rebels. Eventually, the rest of the brigade came up and helped hold the line until the rest of the Union army arrived and forced the Confederates back to Henry Hill. Col. Slocum and Maj. Ballou were among 30 men killed as the regiment sustained 93 casualties in the three hour fight. About 4 p.m., the men from

the Ocean State were called on to protect the retreat as the exhausted Federals were driven off Henry Hill and back across Bull Run.

The men of the 2nd, among the last to cross the bridge over Bull Run, did not escape unscathed.

Chased by Confederate artillery, the retreat became a rout at the Cub Run bridge, about two miles from the battlefield, as the army became entangled with civilians fleeing back to Washington. The Rhode Island Battery would lose five of its six guns and all of its horses at the crossing, while the men of the 2nd regiment staggered back to the forts of the capital city along with the rest of the army. Elisha Hunt Rhodes went on to become the colonel in command of the 2nd regiment, which would fight all the way to final victory at Appomattox Court House.

The "Bull Run gun" is on display in the capitol building in Providence but there is no monument at Manassas to the brave men of the 2nd R.I. A line of five guns on Mathews Hill is all that mark the location where a regiment of raw recruits became veterans and heroes.

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