

SILENT DEATH: R.I. INFANTRY FIGHTS WAR, MOSQUITOES IN MISS.

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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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Joseph Burdick lay in a hospital at Haynes Bluff, just north of Vicksburg, Miss., as his brothers-in-law Isaac Saunders and Abel Kenyon marched off with the rest of the 7th Rhode Island Infantry to capture Jackson, the state capital. By the time they returned, Burdick, a native of Hopkinton, was dead. He wasn't the victim of shot or shell, but of a more insidious killer - disease.

For every two Rhode Islanders killed in action during the Civil War, another three were felled by disease. In fact, of the more than 600,000 soldiers who died on both sides, two-thirds died of disease. It was worse for a regiment of New Englanders stationed in the Deep South.

"Most of the 9th Corps was suffering from the Southern climate," said Robert Grandchamp, the author of "Rhode Island in the Civil War: Voices from the Ocean State."

"Almost everyone in the 7th R.I. was sick and 50 died from disease," according to Grandchamp. "The regiment was in such bad shape it had to be sent back to Kentucky." All told, 47 Rhode Islanders died in the Mississippi campaign, but only two died as a result of battle.

The deaths would be blamed on "miasma" or "bad air" in the hot, humid swamps of the South. We now know that the killers were spread by mosquitoes, ticks and fetid water. Diseases we think of as tropical, like malaria, yellow fever and ague, were endemic to the area and New Englanders had no immunity. Other diseases struck both sides equally.

According to the National Museum of Civil War Medicine, 995 out of every 1000 soldiers suffered intestinal diseases.

The worst were dysentery and "camp fever" caused by bad food and water contaminated by poorly placed and overflowing latrines. Together, they would be responsible for more than 100,000 of the nearly 200,000 disease related deaths in the Union armies.

Pneumonia too, took its toll, with soldiers on both sides constantly exposed to the elements. The disease, now easily treatable with antibiotics, was fatal in the 19th century.

"Alfred Sheldon Knight of Scituate died of pneumonia," Grandchamp related about his ancestor. "He survived what he called a 'storm of shot and shell that fell like hail' at Fredericksburg but died two months later from disease."

What we think of as childhood diseases could be devastating, too, as thousands of men from a still primarily rural America were thrown together in what amounted to mini-cities.

Measles, mumps and chickenpox killed and disabled thousands of soldiers.

By the time the Jackson campaign ended, the 7th regiment was down to a total of 100 men fit for duty. The regiment recovered and did its hardest fighting of the war in the summer of 1864, as part of Grant's Overland Campaign, where the regiment would be reduced to just 80 men.

Despite covering themselves in glory on the fields of Virginia, however, it would be Mississippi that the regiment wanted to remember.

Grandchamp noted that Rhode Island has a beautiful statue at Vicksburg Military Park.

"They purposely put it there because they were the only Rhode Island regiment to fight in Mississippi. They wanted people to remember they fought there," he said.

The statue, made of Westerly granite, portrays a soldier picking up his tattered regimental colors and advancing.

Joseph Burdick died on July 19, 1863, and is buried in Rockville Cemetery in Hopkinton. Abel Kenyon survived the war and is buried near Burdick. Isaac Saunders was killed at Spotsylvania and rests in the Fredericksburg National Cemetery.

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