

THE 4TH R.I. STANDS ALONE AT ANTIETAM

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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.

It may have been late in the day, but at 3:30 in the afternoon of Sept. 17, 1862, it looked to the men of the 4th Rhode Island infantry that the opportunity to end the Civil War had arrived. Entering Otto's cornfield, south of the small Maryland village of Sharpsburg, they could see men in blue advancing towards them from the other side. It appeared that Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia was cut off.

The 4th R.I., along with the 16th Connecticut regiment, represented the left flank of Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan's Army of the Potomac. Part of the 9th Corps, they were tasked with cutting off the rebel army from its only line of retreat, the Harper's Ferry road. Unfortunately for the Ocean State men, the 3,000 men of Confederate Gen. A.P. Hill's command were coming up that same road, wearing their newly captured blue uniforms. Battle had raged all day along Antietam creek to the north of Sharpsburg as more than 50,000 Union infantry of the 1st, 2nd and 12th Corps battered approximately 35,000 Confederates from the commands of Gens. Thomas (Stonewall) Jackson and James Longstreet in disjointed attacks. Missing from Lee's forces was Hill's division, left behind to take the surrender of the Union garrison at Harper's Ferry, 17 miles to the south.

Meanwhile, some 12,000 men of the 9th Corps under Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside were blocked by 400 men from Brig. Gen. Robert Toombs' Brigade, entrenched on the bluffs above the span that would be known forever as Burnside's Bridge.

Following his orders to cross Antietam creek at the bridge south of Sharpsburg, Burnside ordered charge after charge across the bridge in the face of Toombs' Georgians. More than 500 Federals fell in the attempts.

"Burnside focused on the bridge," said Robert Grandchamp, author of "Voices from the Ocean State," and recently returned from leading a tour of the battlefield. "He was the kind of officer who was good at following orders. He followed his orders to the letter."

At about 1 p.m., Brig. Gen. Isaac Rodman discovered a ford south of Burnside's Bridge and received permission for his division to cross. The rest of the 9th Corps crossed over the shellpocked bridge as Toombs was forced back to face the new threat to his south.

Advancing with the 8th Connecticut to attack the Confederate right flank, Rodman sent the 4th R.I. and the 16th Conn. across Otto's cornfield to cut the Harper's Ferry road.

On the other side of the cornfield, the South Carolina brigade of Brig. Gen. Maxcy Gregg had turned off the road, and aided by their blue uniforms, surprised the oncoming Federals. When Gregg's men opened fire, the 16th Conn. disintegrated. The 4th stood alone, but in just 10 minutes, they lost 31 killed and 80 wounded. Hill had arrived from Harper's Ferry just in time.

"The 16th Connecticut was composed of 800 raw recruits that had just arrived from Hartford. Many didn't even know how to load their muskets," Grandchamp explained. "They fired once and ran away."

"If (the 9th Corps) had crossed earlier, they would have split the backbone of Lee's army. The war would have been over."

The Army of Northern Virginia had been saved from destruction but at a terrible cost. More than 22,000 Americans fell at Antietam, 3,600 never to rise again. With 10,000 casualties in the Southern army, Lee knew that his invasion of the North had come to an end. Ironically for the anti-abolitionist McClellan, the retreat of Lee's army back to Virginia gave President Abraham Lincoln the strategic victory he needed to issue his Emancipation Proclamation. McClellan had done just enough.

One week after the battle, Lincoln changed America forever.

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