

69th New York

Company A, 69th New York State Volunteers

Images by Wm. Dunnaway. 2005

69th NYSV History

More than 170,000 Irish-born Americans fought under the flag of the United States between 1861 and 1865. Society in the United States had, up to that time, displayed a marked anti-Catholic sentiment, and most newly immigrated Irish occupied close to the lowest rung of the economic ladder, but this did not dissuade many from rallying to the colors at the beginning of the war. When President Lincoln made his first call for volunteers following the bombardment of Fort Sumter, the 69th NYSM (New York State Militia) was the second unit to leave New York City.

The 69th NYSM served at 1st Bull Run under the command of then-brigade commander William T. Sherman, then returned home and mustered out of Federal service. At this point, the decision was made to raise an "Irish Brigade" for government service and many members of the 69th NYSM joined the new 69th New York State Volunteers (NYSV), the first regiment of the new Irish Brigade. The 69th NYSV would eventually suffer the greatest number of casualties of all New York regiments and would serve from its inception to the surrender at Appomattox with the Army of the Potomac. Selected as commander of the Irish Brigade was Thomas Francis Meagher, a man of outspoken anti-English sentiment who had been exiled to Tasmania by the Crown for his activities in Ireland. Together with the 63rd and 88th New York regiments, the 69th NYSV joined the Army of the Potomac to pursue the war against the Confederacy.

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Beginning with the ill-fated Peninsular Campaign against Richmond, the Irish Brigade in general and the 69th NYSV in particular began building a reputation for hard fighting and courage, as well as lavish hospitality. Part of the renowned II Corps, the Irish often figured prominently in any advance and rearguard actions. More than one general was known to

ask "Where are my green flags?" the reference to the green regimentals of the Irish units is significant.

The Irish Brigade went through perhaps its most valorous period starting with the Battle of Antietam (17 September, 1862) and its frontal assault on the Sunken Road, and ending at the Battle of Gettysburg (1-3 July, 1863) with its engagement with Kershaw's Confederates at the Wheatfield. During this period the Brigade figured prominently in Burnside's disastrous attacks at Fredericksburg (13 December, 1862), during which the 69th lost some 75% of its strength. It was during the fighting at Fredericksburg that Private Timothy Donohue crawled between the opposing lines to carry a wounded officer to safety, an act for which he was subsequently awarded the Medal of Honor. By the time of Gettysburg the Brigade had been reduced to a bare skeleton of its former strength, with the 69th numbered under 200 and comprised of a mere two companies. General Meagher had already resigned his commission in protest when refused permission to return the Brigade home to for recruiting.

The Irish remained with the Army of the Potomac through the hard fighting under Grant, and took part in the surrender ceremony at Appomattox Courthouse in April of 1865. By the war's end various regiments from various states had passed through the Brigade at one point or another, but the same original three New York regiments had always served with the formation. Fresh infusions of manpower had increased their depleted numbers, but many of the best and bravest who had originally marched off to war from New York never returned. Many of the original members had joined to gain military experience with which they hoped to return to Ireland and free their land from English rule; however, it was not to be. Too many of those devoted to Irish nationalism lay buried along the eastern seaboard, casualties of the bitter years of '61 through '65.

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For further information please see our company website:

<http://www.fighting69th.org>

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