

August 14, 1863

THE CUP OF SORROW

A CROWD GATHERED AT THE CONCORD RAILROAD DEPOT at nine o'clock on a Friday morning to welcome the Sixteenth New Hampshire Volunteers home from Dixie. Covering the event, Amos Hadley of the *Independent Democrat* noted that "here and there we saw in the crowd of friends a weeping wife, mother, or sister, who had learned that the dear friend she had expected to meet, had been struck down by disease, or smitten by death, since the Regiment had been upon its homeward way." As the day wore on, it became clear that the Sixteenth, without losing a man in battle, had suffered a calamity. In nine months of service, disease had killed nearly 200 of its men, and more were dying. During the two-week trip home from Louisiana the regiment had left sick soldiers all along the Mississippi River: forty in Vicksburg, thirty-six between there and Cairo, Illinois. The trail of sickness and death continued east by rail through Indianapolis, Buffalo, Albany, and Worcester.

It was not only the bewilderment of women at the depot that alerted the crowd to the scope of the suffering. There were fifty-one sick men still aboard the train. Members of the Soldiers' Aid Society tended to these men and "assisted the feeble to carriages, and carts covered with mattresses," but would there be room for them all? An improvised clinic at city hall had sixty beds, and a hospital was being built nearby. During the next three weeks, doctors and nurses cared for a hundred soldiers from the Sixteenth and the Fifteenth, another nine-month regiment just returned. Eight died within two days of arriving, nine more by early September.

To ease the distress of the families of men left behind, Governor Gilmore, the railroad boss who had taken office in June, sent two men to retrace the Sixteenth's route and look after any New Hampshire soldiers they found. The two were his son, the Reverend Joseph H. Gilmore, an accomplished scholar who had written the hymn "He Leadeth Me" and recently become the Baptist pastor in Fisherville, and P. Brainard Cogswell, a journalist who lived in the household of the Concord abolitionist Parker Pillsbury. The governor told them to spare no expense in caring for the sick.

On August 16 the two shared news that the thirty men in Worcester were all well enough to start for home. At Albany, Miss Carey, a Quaker “who has abandoned the position which wealth and education assign her to become the head of a noble charity,” was watching over five sick New Hampshire soldiers. Two Sixteenth men were in danger, Charles Thompson of Franklin, “quite sick with typhoid fever,” and Isaac C. Drew of Portsmouth, “very low.” Thompson lived, Drew died. At Albany Gilmore and Cogswell “stumbled on a car-load of sick soldiers, procured omnibuses, got them all (without distinction of State) up to hospital.” Among them were George C. Andrews of New Boston and five other Sixteenth soldiers who had been left at Cairo. Gilmore helped Andrews to a comfortable bed, but he died two weeks later.

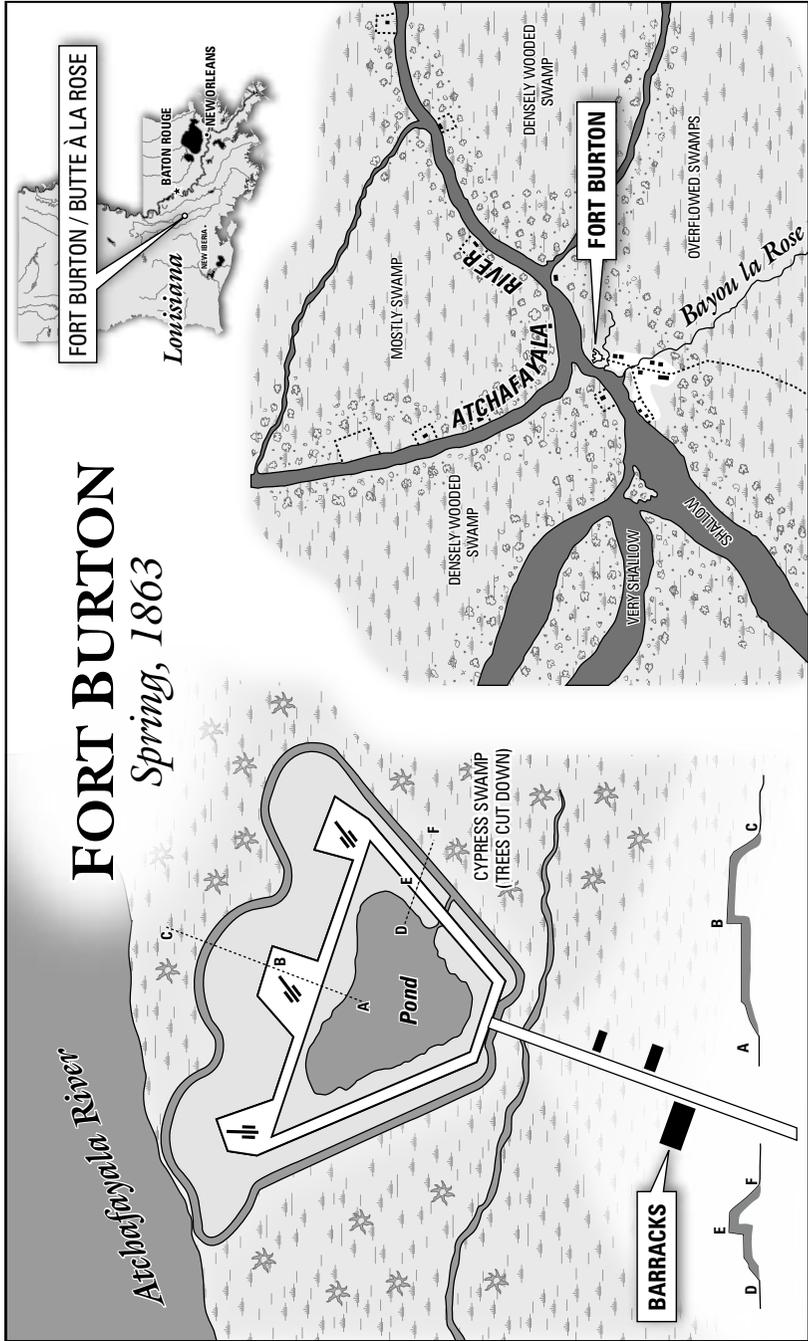
Although Gilmore and Cogswell had planned to travel only as far as Buffalo, they pushed on after hearing of sick men farther west. They helped men at Indianapolis and Mattoon, Illinois. They visited the “unpleasant and unhealthy” hospital at Mound City, where twenty-one New Hampshire men had died in seventeen days. The surgeon begged them to take away the New Hampshire soldiers as well as nineteen men from other New England states. If they didn’t, he said, all would surely die. The same surgeon told them that when a boatload of ill New Hampshire men arrived earlier at Mound City, a decomposed corpse lay exposed on deck and a Concord man was carried to the hospital “in the last stages of typhoid fever and *without a single rag of clothing on his body.*”

Cogswell and Gilmore started east with twenty-four soldiers in their care. Only eight could stand. Not one had changed clothes in weeks, nor could a single man lift his knapsack from one train to another. They collected more soldiers along the way, their hospital on wheels growing to forty patients. They acted as nurses and porters and ate and slept with the sick. The day they reached Buffalo, thirteen New Hampshire soldiers, including six from the Fifteenth and Sixteenth regiments, were buried in that city’s Forest Lawn Cemetery. “Nowhere have our soldiers been so tenderly cared for as in the city of Buffalo,” they wrote. The bodies were “interred in neat black walnut coffins in a private cemetery & followed to the grave by more than fifty private carriages.” The *Buffalo Express* reported Governor Gilmore’s offer to pay for the care of his state’s soldiers, but the people of Buffalo wouldn’t hear of it. Cogswell and Pastor Gilmore were exhausted when they reached Concord on August 26, but they cherished

the soldiers they had helped. "I tell you, their eyes shine when they see us," Gilmore had written his father.

Yet not even these Good Samaritans could fully grasp the hell the Sixteenth New Hampshire had endured. Although the regiment lost its first man to illness in Louisiana in January, the devastation began in the spring, when it was sent to occupy Fort Burton at Butte a la Rose. On April 19, the men boarded four boats and steamed onto a lake unlike the clear ponds of New Hampshire. Along Lake Grand's shore, "thick underbrush admits only the slimy, sinuous windings of the moccasin or rattlesnake, or the furtive creeping of the alligator," a soldier wrote. The boats next entered a narrow stream where branches scraped their sides and they sometimes beached on sharp shallow turns. The men saw smoke rising above the trees ahead and knew their destination was near. A dead tree crashed across the bow of the *Clifton*, the convoy's most heavily armed ship. When the convoy reached Fort Burton, one shot from the *Clifton* persuaded the rebel garrison to run down its flag. Private James Richardson of Lebanon wished his nephew had been there to see it. "There was a Reb gun boat in front of the fort when we hove in sight," he wrote. "Our boats put it to them with all fury & they left for up river in all haste." The rebel boats escaped, but the soldiers in the fort did not. "In less time than it takes to write it, they were waving everything white they could lay their hands on," "Fred" wrote his hometown newspaper. Sixty officers and men were captured and sent back to Brashear City on one of the boats that had brought the Sixteenth to the fort. Their commander told Captain Daniel E. Howard of Hopkinton that although we were "doubtless glad to get there, we would be much more pleased when we left." Lieutenant Colonel Henry W. Fuller of Concord informed another officer that he was a prisoner. The officer was "damned glad of it," as were other captives. "They said they had staid there in the swamps as long as they desired to, and they thought when we had been there a few months we would be glad to surrender also."

The new barracks at the fort convinced many men that this prophecy was sour grapes. "It is a treat for the men and officers to have an opportunity once more to sleep on something besides the ground, and have a comfortable roof to shelter them from the inclemencies of the cold night dews," wrote "Fred." Another man called the new quarters "better barracks than we have seen since enlistment, not excepting those on the Pine Plains of Concord." Richardson wrote his brother that the men "lived high by



foreaging” for two weeks, stealing cattle, sheep, eggs, poultry, sugar, and molasses. But then local people “complained so bitterly a stop has been put to it.” Luther Townsend of Salem, the Sixteenth’s adjutant, extolled the fort’s “commanding view” of Atchafayala Bayou.

Not everyone was so smitten. “How long we’re to stay in this place nobody knows, but I hope not long,” Andrew Farnum wrote his father in West Concord. There was a morass on the parade ground. Even the man who praised the barracks called the place “execrable.” Captain Howard found it “a fearful and pestilential spot” with the only available drinking water coming from the overflow of Red River Valley swamps. The fort was a meeting place for mosquitoes, fleas, ticks, and lice, snakes, lizards, frogs, and germs that caused dysentery, yellow fever, malaria, and other diseases. A soldier described the mosquitoes as “comparatively civil and respectful during the day, but at the approach of night their scattered forces are heard returning from all quarters, and can be seen ‘massing’ their columns in the immediate vicinity of their intended point of attack, and piping up their accursed strains as a kind of prelude to combined assaults upon those whose blood they seek.” The bedtime routine was to tuck mosquito netting under a blanket, undress quickly, wave a newspaper around the head, open the netting, dive into bed, and re-tuck the netting. The men fell asleep to a “continuous hum and buzz” while thanking “nature and art for gauze and muslin.”

A regimental doctor died, another took a furlough, and the chaplain went home sick. Like most regiments, the Sixteenth relied on its sutler, an itinerant merchant, for goods not supplied by the government. After a train accident killed his son, the sutler left, depriving the men of lemons, oranges, and other fruit. The sick turned yellow. Sores erupted on their skin and they shook with fever. Many lost so much weight they looked skeletal. One soldier’s diary entries often consisted of four words: “Unwell. Not doing much.” Details buried the dead and penciled their names on pine boards. Hardly a boat passed without picking up soldiers “prostrated and reduced to the extremity of suffering and weakness by the poison inhaled from the miasmas of the low marshy grounds,” an officer wrote. As summer approached and no rains came, the water level dropped, exposing the muck in which parasites thrived. The men worried it would sink so low no ship could rescue them. Of the 530 men who had arrived at Fort Burton, fewer than 200 were fit for duty six weeks later. Townsend went to New Orleans

for elixirs to cure the illnesses or treat the symptoms. After his return some men with chills swallowed Hosteter's Bitters in large doses and "became staggering drunk," Townsend wrote. The president of the regiment's temperance society, he realized too late he had supplied them with whiskey.

As Townsend and others begged in vain to have the regiment transferred, the men concluded they had been left to die. They saw their mission as commercial, not military. Each day, two or three boats steamed past from plantations north of the fort to deliver cotton to New Orleans. "One boat that went down day before yesterday had about 100,000 dollars worth, quite a pile for one boat," Andrew Farnum wrote his father. As Townsend put it, "No one can deny that the lives of New Hampshire men were imperiled for a few bales of cotton and hogsheds of molasses."

Salvation came at last in the person of a lowly captain. Hearing of the regiment's plight, Alpheus Hyatt of the Forty-seventh Massachusetts somehow requisitioned steamers at Brashear City, seventy-five miles away, to relieve the garrison. One evening, the stern-wheel transports *Corine* and *Kepper* appeared at Fort Burton. That anyone was alive struck Hyatt as a miracle. He noted the contrast between the muscular crewmen who loaded the sick onto the ships and the emaciated soldiers who tried to help. Gazing down from the pilot house to the deck, he saw "solid piles of motionless, blanketed men stretched out straight on their backs, quiet as the dead they so closely resembled."

The rescue made some men giddy. The faces of the sick, wrote one soldier, "are animated with the glow of pleasure at having received marching orders, and many a poor invalid, heartsick at the slowness of convalescence in this depressing climate, evinces erectness of form and strength of step." Townsend shook himself to be sure he was not dreaming. Had the rescue ships not come, he wrote, the regiment's only hope would have been capture by rebels coming east to retake the Mississippi River.

Before leaving, men carried off the two cannons and destroyed the magazine and anything else at the fort that might aid the enemy. They torched the barracks that had so pleased them at first. They burned warehouses and "bade farewell to that dear old place, having already bidden farewell to the health and vigor of our regiment." The soldier who made this comment added that only at Fort Burton had the Sixteenth turned its back to the enemy. "If we fought its *Generals* much longer," he wrote, "none would be left to tell our fate of *yellow* destruction and *bilious* deeds."

The Sixteenth left a boatload of sick men in New Orleans, reducing its strength to fewer than 200 rifles. "Fred" wrote from Port Hudson in mid-June that 100 soldiers and 18 officers, including the new assistant surgeon, were in the hospital there. "Such is the condition of the regiment that we have been pronounced unfit for duty by the Medical Director, and left in the rear to guard ammunition," he wrote. Able soldiers turned out almost daily for the burial of another comrade with "the muffled drum, the mournful fife, the trailed banner . . . and the parting volley." During the final week at Port Hudson, the number of men fit for duty each morning averaged eighty.

On August 1, the regiment formed for the last time on southern soil. It was now the size of a single company. Captain George W. Bosworth of Lyndeborough looked down his company's streets and saw "one of the saddest sights I ever witnessed." Sick men lay everywhere. When it came time to board the *Sallie List*, Bosworth left a lieutenant in charge of his few able-bodied men and supervised the ambulances himself. One by one, the sick were borne a mile to the bluff above the steamer's mooring and laid on the ground with knapsacks for pillows. Stretcher-bearers carried them to the steamer. Captain Howard was assigned to load the knapsacks even though he had just three men who could lift them. After midnight, the post quartermaster checked the regiment's supplies for the journey. He sent more pine coffins but still feared the Sixteenth might run out before reaching Concord. Men who could barely raise their heads watched the coffins being loaded. Some died before the *Sallie List* docked at Natchez. At Vicksburg, General Grant's post surgeon ordered forty men to a hospital boat. Many cried when they heard they would be left behind, and with good reason. Few of the forty made it home alive. So it went all the way up the Mississippi River to Cairo, where the men left the steamer and boarded a train. Caring people met and fed them at every depot, but the regiment buried comrades in every state between Illinois and New Hampshire.

Tears of joy and tears of grief flowed at their homecoming. Women embraced sons and husbands. Fathers who did not at first recognize returning sons were relieved to find them alive. There were other scenes at the station. Women peered into the cars looking for a familiar face. "Where is George?" they asked. "Where is my Eddie?" Soldiers who had watched so many comrades die now saw their mothers and wives buckle in anguish at news of their deaths.

A formal escort gathered at Railroad Square to accompany soldiers who

could march to the Phenix Hotel on Main Street. It included a drum corps, a band, and members of the Fifth New Hampshire, which had come home to recruit after Gettysburg. A few musicians from the Sixteenth formed a band under the direction of a Newport soldier, Marciene Whitcomb. A dinner prepared by Joseph G. Wyatt, the popular cook at the military training camp in Concord, awaited the regiment at the Phenix.

Afterward it was time for speeches, but the circumstances were awkward. The Sixteenth had served just nine months and made no gallant charges. Yet nearly 200 of its men had died, and more were dying. A hundred more officers and men were gone by Christmas, raising the death toll to nearly a third of the 914 who had answered their country's call in the fall of 1862. Governor Gilmore and the regimental commander, Colonel James Pike, spoke of these somber circumstances. "There is no regiment which has gone from our state that has suffered more from sickness, fatigue, or done more irksome duty than the Sixteenth," Gilmore told the men. "There is no New Hampshire regiment whose record is such that we need to blush to receive them, and I can congratulate you, officers and soldiers of the Sixteenth, on having done all that you were told to do." Colonel Pike thanked the governor and said: "I regret that we have not been in a position to win for ourselves, for you and our state that imperishable renown that it has been the lot of the Second, Fifth, Eighth, and other New Hampshire regiments to achieve. But we have the proud consciousness, sir, of having been where we were ordered to go and having done what we were ordered to do." Pike noted the price the regiment had paid. "Our thinned ranks and the enfeebled condition of many of our men attest that the cup of sorrow has not been allowed to pass us by. . . . Those who have fallen and lie beneath the sods of that unhealthy clime are martyrs in the glorious cause as truly as though they fell on the battlefield."